

WILD WEST THEME PARKS IN AMERICA

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by

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ABSTRACT

The Wild West theme park is a piece of Americana that experienced great popularity in the mid-twentieth century. Their legacies survive through photographs, maps, and first-hand accounts posted online, but only a fraction were documented. As they merge two important parts of history, Wild West theme parks deserve an elemental examination, as well as contemplation on their preservation. This thesis examines Wild West theme parks by delving into their two basic elements, the American West obsession and the history of theme parks, and by studying three cases: Frontier Town, Frontier Village, and Ghost Town.

The Western obsession began with the American settlement when letters were published and, soon after, writers and artists rode the terrain documenting the West. Movies perpetuated the myth of the West, and television continued the tradition. The Western obsession climaxed in the 1950s and '60s with constant exposure to the genre, but declined with space travel and video games in the 1970s and '80s.

Theme parks are rooted in fairs, pleasure gardens, and world's fairs. Theme parks started in America when settlers established picnic grounds, which became immensely popular when they were created at the end of trolley lines. The amusement park as we know it today was established with Coney Island and popularized by Disney, who created a cleaner and safer park. The industry changed when conglomerates began purchasing parks.

With the height of the Western obsession and a renewed popularity of theme parks in the 1950s and '60s, the creation of Wild West theme parks was a natural convergence of the two elements. The parks suffered in the 1970s when the West was no longer a fascination and the amusement park industry changed. Examination of three parks finds the demise of Wild West theme parks was due to changes in those two elements, as well as circumstances that caused regular theme parks to fail, such as urban decay, increased land values, and limitations on upgrades. However, two questions linger: could Wild West theme parks have survived and how? and should the remaining parks be preserved, and if yes, how?

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jessica Stevenson was born and raised in Memphis, Tennessee. She received her Bachelor of Arts in History from Auburn University and is pursuing a Master of Arts in Historic Preservation Planning at Cornell University. She currently resides in New Orleans, Louisiana.

To my parents, George and Debbie Stevenson,
for whose love and encouragement I am eternally grateful.

And to my maternal grandparents, Bill and Barbara Springer,
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INTRODUCTION

Do you remember the days when there were no interstates, no seatbelts in cars, and a big part of the excitement of going on vacation was the car ride there? I don't remember those days, but I have heard about them. I was born in the 1980s, grew up in the '90s, and our method of traveling either consisted of a short plane ride to our destination or a trip down the interstate going as fast as the speed limit would permit. If we made an overnight stop along the way, it was at a hotel chain off of an exit that had a dozen fast-food restaurants, too many gas stations, and a handful of other chain hotels. Since these exits were usually there to simply serve the interstate travelers on their way to somewhere else, the only source of entertainment was a shallow pool behind some of the hotels.

As a kid, I traveled with my dad from Memphis, Tennessee to Plattsburgh, New York every couple of years. Plattsburgh is a small college town, location of SUNY Plattsburgh, that used to be home to a U.S. Air Force Base. Route 9, a road that stretches from New York City to Canada, cuts right through the middle of downtown Plattsburgh and, as it reaches the outskirts of town, is lined with vacant motels. My dad always explained to me that before the construction of Interstate 87, known as the "Northway" by locals, Route 9 was the main way to travel through New York. Motels, restaurants, and attractions were located along the way to meet the needs of travelers. As soon as the Northway was built (within eyesight of Route 9 in some locations), families stopped traveling the two-lane road to take advantage of the interstate. When this happened, businesses along Route 9 struggled and eventually closed. Everything shifted towards the Northway, including town centers. The only reason Plattsburgh still has a somewhat

thriving downtown is because of SUNY, but the city has built up its exits located on the Northway with malls, hotels, restaurants, and gas stations. All that is left of the once-thriving Route 9 thoroughfare are the vacant buildings that sadly remind us of a bygone era. This haunted me as a child, and as I've gotten older, my curiosity led me to research how the construction of the interstate systems changed small towns along the original main thoroughfares. As I researched this topic for classes, I was enchanted by the many themed motels, restaurants, and independently-run attractions that lined not only Route 9, but also many other state routes throughout the country. To finally see photographs of the outskirts of Plattsburgh before the invasion of the Northway intrigued me even more. When reviewing the photographs taken in the 1950s and '60s, one kind of attraction seemed to be consistently replicated throughout the United States: the Wild West-themed amusement park. This remains fascinating, especially since most of them are no longer around and, strangely enough, have never been written about.

It is difficult to say how many Wild West theme parks existed, when the first one was founded, or even which one came first. It has been speculated that independently-owned theme parks got their start in the Adirondack area, and with that, the first Wild West theme park. Others claim that Knott's Berry Farm in California, which began in the 1920s as a berry stand that sold fried chicken lunches and grew into an amusement park by the 1940s, was the first appearance of the western theme in an amusement area. There also have been so many western theme parks that existed and so many that have been forgotten that there may be some without any documentation. With many contradicting stories and opinions, it is difficult to say when and where the first Wild West theme park originated.

Many of the parks strove to be as accurate to real western towns as possible, while others were built based on media representations. Many of the parks stayed away from modern-day rides, while others built the parks originally with thrill rides. Whatever the case, why were these parks so popular? For children, these parks gave them the opportunity to live out their dreams as cowboys and Indians in a real-life western setting. For parents, these theme parks were designed with “architecture of reassurance,” which allowed them a day of nostalgia to enjoy the pleasant shadiness of the landscaped park as they watched their children play. For everyone, it was a moment to escape the harsh realities of the Cold War.

While researching this topic, I read dozens of books and articles having to do with the West and theme parks. My research then focused on individual Wild West theme parks by examining blogs, websites, vintage photos, and postcards. If needed, I contacted individuals who had connections to the parks. Visits to North Hudson and Maggie Valley provided opportunities for first-hand study, where more information became evident. The task of deciding which parks to write about was not easy, but it came down to three issues. First, it was important to examine parks from different areas of the country. Secondly, it was important to examine parks in different phases of their life cycles. Thirdly, it came down to which ones had the most information available. As mentioned earlier, not much has been written about Wild West theme parks, and since most of them are gone, the only sources of information are websites dedicated to some of these parks, photographs and postcards from archives, old newspaper articles, and personal accounts of the parks. Luckily, these parks live on in the hearts of many who

visited them as children and young adults, and it is the feeling of nostalgia that has kept these places alive.

This thesis examines three western theme parks: Frontier Town in North Hudson, New York, Frontier Village in San Jose, California, and Ghost Town in the Sky in Maggie Valley, North Carolina. While Wild West theme parks have many facets, for the purpose of this paper and the limited amount of time to write, only the most basic background elements are discussed: the obsession with the American west and theme parks. Both of these subjects are deeply rooted in America's history, going as far back as the settlement of this country. The examination of these two elements will piece together the grand phenomenon that was the Wild West theme park era (many times with direct correlations), and how the popularity of the two elements converged to create this unique piece of Americana. We will then follow up with examinations of the three theme parks, looking at how and why each one got started, how each one was designed, how each one worked, the changes incurred through the years, and finally what led to each one's demise.

CHAPTER 1

A Brief History of the Obsession with the American West

During the mid-twentieth century, almost every boy's constant companions were his pistol, always worn at the hip, and his cowboy hat. Everyday products had icons like the Marlboro Man and among America's favorite television shows were *Bonanza* and *Gunsmoke*. Road trips usually included a night's stay in the family's Covered Wagon Camper or a Wigwam Village Motel (a countrywide trend where guests stayed in concrete teepees). One major reason for the development of so many Wild West theme parks was the American obsession with the West. The American West became an entity of its own, full of excitement and adventure. Not only Americans, but people all over the world had an image of what the American West was like around the turn of the twentieth century: how the people dressed (everyone from cowboys and Indians to miners and barmaids), what the landscape looked like, what the architecture looked like, and how the people spent their time. Some of the western characterizations were accurate, some were not. So how did the West gain the image and reputation that permeated the minds of so many people during the 1940s, '50s, and '60s?

The boundaries of what constitutes the West have always been a subject for deliberation and discussion among critics and scholars. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, often referred to as the most influential historian on the American West, "the frontier existed within the United States wherever Anglo-American forces were transforming a virgin wilderness into a civilized community...the meeting point between

savagery and civilization.”¹ Generally speaking, though, the boundary exists west of the Mississippi River.

The western United States has always been a popular setting for artwork, literature, films and television shows. Contributing to this was the myth of the western landscape, which had its beginnings in the 1500s with Spanish explorer Vasquez de Coronado. Coronado falsely reported to his king that the region consisted entirely of worthless, untenable desert, and explorers after that continued to write of the same findings until the turn of the twentieth century.² The West’s popularity as a location, however, originated with the discovery of America by the Europeans in 1492. Explorers wrote home with tales of exotic lands and people, and with the dissemination of stories about adventures in a mysterious place, a sense of excitement and inspiration was created. The writings were sometimes published and carried throughout Europe, which helped spread the “wild” reputation that the future America would hold. Even as these lands became more settled and open to exploration, it wasn’t until the early nineteenth century that settlers pushed westward and the American West became a place of its own, still full of uncharted territory and native peoples. Western travelers and settlers continued to write home (which at this point was generally the American East coast) about their explorations, and the writings were transformed into stories and printed by publishing companies in America, encouraging more people to venture west. As the paths of exploration in the west continued to be trampled and the aura of danger continued to subside, more writers safely ventured there to find inspiration, and it was

¹ Joe B. Frantz and Julian Earnest Choate, Jr., *The American Cowboy: The Myth and the Reality* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1955), 13.

² Ibid., 16-18.

their writings about the American West that became must-reads.³ With the later rush of the gold and silver mining ventures, an increasing number of people headed west to start a new life. Cities, which sometimes sprang up overnight at junctions of longhorn trails and freshly built railroad tracks, were so new and separated from civilization that laws were not firmly established, so civilians and sheriffs (honest or not) were in control. At the outset, “virtually everything about [these towns] was designed, first, to handle longhorns and, second, to assuage the frustrations of the cowboy” with the numerous bars, gambling halls, and brothels.⁴ Western towns often became centers for unsavory and immoral behaviors. Add in frequent visits from rowdy cowboys, the temporary nature of the western towns (they were known to have a short life span due to entrepreneurs and businessmen frequently moving to newer locations that offered relaxed laws, railroad connections, and generally more business), and the constant fear of Indian invasion, and writers had the perfect atmosphere for an exciting story. The myth of the western landscape that

the feeling that the Old West, with its rock-ribbed mountains, its sheer canyons, and its waterless wastelands, was fabulously formidable became so deeply imbedded in the American thinking that Western fiction produce[d] an automatic state of mind and a sense of setting which conditions both writer and reader before the story ever gets underway.⁵

Critics say that it was these early American writings in the first half of the nineteenth century that helped establish the typical story framework for westerns in that they revolve around a struggle. Mostly, it is a man’s struggle of choosing between “the savage but free life of the woods and the refined but constricted society of the

³ Edward Buscombe ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Athenaeum, 1988), 16-17.

⁴ Forbis, 187.

⁵ Frantz and Choate, 18.

settlements,”⁶ as the development of American civilization was occurring at this time. The struggles in western writings were personified in different characters and plotlines: gunfighters versus townspeople, ranchers versus farmers, Indians versus settlers, outlaws versus sheriffs. So precarious are these personifications, though, that one can never tell which will be the protagonist. Any one of these characters could represent one side of a struggle between the individual and community, between nature and culture, between freedom and restriction, or between agrarianism and industrialism. These struggles represent the contemporary concepts of the time, such as the doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the protest of the Populist Movement.⁷

The antecedents of westerns are Arthurian legends, Homeric tales, and early romance stories. Tall tales that were told as a source of entertainment became American folklore, and as the years went by and writers began studying these tales, they were published as paperback books around the 1860s and became known as dime novels and penny dreadfuls.⁸ By the 1880s, hard-covered Western novels were produced by Lippincott, a respectable publishing company that was founded in Philadelphia in 1792. These books were a notch above the dime novels in quality and material and achieved decent circulation.⁹

Ned Buntline, whose real name was Edward Z. C. Judson, penned many dime novels. He is credited with creating the reputations and personas of many great western “heroes” such as Wyatt Earp, Wild Bill Hickock, and Buffalo Bill Cody. Unlike many writers who imagined their characters, Buntline based his on actual people. However,

⁶ Buscombe, 18-19.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brian Garfield, *Western Films: A Complete Guide* (New York: Rawson Associations, 1982), 9-10.

⁹ Ibid., 12.

these three men were not the heroes the books claimed they were. In fact, each of the men had spent time in jail for criminal acts. Buntline borrowed their names and created heroic tall tales based only slightly on their lives. The men loved the fact that, because of Buntline, they were now admired celebrities.¹⁰ Buntline soon took to the stage, bringing along Cody and Hickok as the stars in the theatrical versions of his dime novels. The shows contained endless action and incessant fighting with villains, both Indian and white. The first show opened in New York City in 1871, the same time that Doc Carver was traveling with his Wild West Show. Carver's Wild West Show was a traveling arena full of stunt performers doing tricks with horses, ropes, and guns. Both Buntline's and Carver's shows were a huge hit with audiences and were selling out in every city they visited. Their popularity was proof that western stories were better told in a physical and visual nature, as the books didn't quite capture the excitement of the West, and an American obsession was created by the 1880s.¹¹

Eventually, Buntline and Doc Carver combined their shows to create a western extravaganza. They advertised the show as a "living picture of life on the frontier [where one would] see Indians, Cowboys, and Mexicans as they live."¹² More and more people joined the traveling event, including Indians, buffalo hunters, Annie Oakley, and Texas Jack. All performers were used to reenact battles, execute fights between the white stars and Native Americans, and stage shootouts, stagecoach holdups, and hand-to-hand combat. These shows were immensely popular and influential, and drew crowds by the

¹⁰ Ibid., 9-10.

¹¹ Ibid., 10-11.

¹² Richard W. Slatta, Ph.D., *Cowboy: The Illustrated History* (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 170.

thousands. Eventually, imitators created their own traveling Wild West shows, and had great success.¹³

Throughout the nineteenth century, artists began to capture the various elements of the West on canvas. Earlier artists focused on the landscape, Native American life, and the vaquero (antecedent to the cowboy, originally from Mexico) life. The cowboy, as well as cavalry charges against Native American tribes, didn't become a focus for paintings until just after the Civil War. Frederic Remington, who is often noted as one of the greatest cowboy artists of all time, was known to ride with troops in order to get an accurate depiction of events to record in his canvas or his sculptures. Remington's main competition, Charles Marion Russell, was also talented with sketching, painting, and sculpting and, upon Remington's death, became world famous with the placement of his art in a gallery in New York City and an exhibition in London. The inclusion of western-themed artwork in journals and magazines helped make the image of the West well known in other parts of the world, and it was these robust, colorful, and dramatic depictions that helped to romanticize the region further.¹⁴ At the same time, photographers were beginning to wander the West looking for subjects to capture. They were known to take photos of cowboys on the range, and sell the prints to them.¹⁵

Somewhere amidst the accuracies and inaccuracies of American West literature, dime novels, and Wild West shows and their various stars, the epic western hero was created: the cowboy. It is important to note that cowboys existed, and still do exist, on three different levels: "the historical level, about which the average American cares and knows [little about]; the fictional level, in which the cowboy occupies a not quite

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 183-185.

¹⁵ William H. Forbis, *The Old West: The Cowboys* (Alexandria, VA: Time-Life Books, 1980), 169.

respectable but highly popular position; and the folklore level, on which the cowboy sits as an idealized creation of the American folk mind.”¹⁶ He was never brought to life in just one character, but instead “has remained a composite telescoped into a single folk type...you must rank the cowboy alongside traditional heroes in accomplishment; there is, however, no single cowboy to represent him...”¹⁷ While many have held the cowboy in high reverence, others have viewed him as lawless, reckless, and violent. Putting these exaggerated character assumptions aside, the cowboy was just a man, usually very young, who was living a hard life tending to herds of cattle for minimal wages.

Beginning in 1894, the Edison Company (and later the American Mutoscope and Biograph Company) began shooting featurettes, including *Indian War Council*, *Buffalo Dance*, *Sioux Indian Ghost Dance*, an Annie Oakley movie, and several Buffalo Bill vignettes. The most popular moving pictures were two films of Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show, shot in 1894 and 1898. *The Great Train Robbery*, released in 1903, was one of the first moving pictures that used editing and intercut scenes to create a plot. The story, which consisted of a robbery, a chase, a fight on top of a moving train, and an ending with the good guys prevailing in a climactic shootout, was not only based on the Wild West shows and penny dreadfuls, but also on current events. Many high profile robberies were occurring at this time, like that of Butch and Sundance, Emmett Dalton, and Al Jennings (Dalton and Jennings eventually got into films). *The Great Train Robbery* set the formula for what a western had to be, and in hindsight, western plots did not change much. They were only missing character development.¹⁸ Soon enough, everyone wanted to cash-in on this phenomenon and new companies were formed and began to make

¹⁶ Frantz and Choate, 15.

¹⁷ Ibid., 70-71.

¹⁸ Edward Buscombe ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Athenaeum, 1988), 16-23.

movies with similar plots from previous movies. Within five or six years, the western film was a mainstay in nickelodeons across the country. These movies celebrated such popularity that attendance to the Wild West shows began to suffer. People realized they could see the same action at the nickelodeon as they could at the show, but at a much cheaper price.

Indians were an important and popular part of these films. They offered not only exoticism, but also provided great justification for action and violence. In the early days of filmmaking, movies were shot in the East, close to civilization and modern facilities, so filmmakers had to make use of what was available to create western scenes. However, a film company called Bison realized the importance of authentic scenery in their western films, so they decided to move west. In 1910, the company bought 18,000 acres in the Santa Ynez Canyon, during which a group called the Miller Brothers 101 Ranch Wild West show was traveling in the same area. The Miller Brothers 101 was based in Oklahoma, but they also traveled the country, bringing with them with their real cowboys and Indians, tepees, stagecoaches, buffalo, cattle, and anything else needed to put on a Wild West show. Bison contracted with Miller Brothers, who allowed them permanent use of the entire outfit. As a result, Bison 101, as the merging companies were renamed, built permanent sets that were modeled after the false-front buildings and real main streets in newly developed western towns. With an entire “collection” of native peoples, Bison began to specialize in western films. Real cowboys were used in filming too, as many cowboys realized that there was more money in becoming an extra on a film than continuing the hard work of herding cattle. At this time, costume warehouses did not have outfits for actors playing cowboys, so when legitimate cowboys became fixtures on

sets, wearing their everyday gear, a note of authenticity was brought to the films. This authenticity wore off eventually, but the early western films captured it well enough.¹⁹

Bison 101 not only invented the concept of permanent sets, but eventually played a part in the transformation of a small town named Hollywood into the home for filmmaking.

The western film industry boomed and flourished. However, for a brief period of time, the introduction of sound into films threatened the action-packed genre due to the fact that the microphone was immovable during filming. By 1928, America was unsure if talking pictures were simply a fad or if they would take over and become an industry standard. While the transition from silents to talkies was slow, there continued to be a demand for silent westerns, though their numbers declined for a few years. When technicians created a movable microphone, the western film came back full force.²⁰

As early as the 1920s, film companies began making low-budget series films, later known as “B-Westerns”. The targeted audiences were men living in rural areas and children. By the 1930s, with the onset of the Depression, double-features became the new attraction, which catapulted the B-Western into immense popularity. In 1933, 26 B-Westerns were produced, followed by 59 in 1934 and 106 in 1935. The B-Westerns were made in a process that has been compared to the assembly lines in Detroit. In fact, by the mid-1930s, every studio had its own B-Western unit.²¹ The films were marketed in packages, each with virtually identical plots, running times, and stars. Audiences knew how the story would go: there would be a fistfight, followed by a chase, and then a shootout at the end. The good and the bad were easily discernable, the answer to the conflict was always very obvious, and the hero never dealt with any inner turmoil as to

¹⁹ Ibid., 26-27.

²⁰ Brian Garfield, *Western Films: A Complete Guide* (New York: Rawson Associations, 1982), 31-32.

²¹ Ibid., 39 and 41.

how to solve a problem. The audience could expect the plot to revolve around three scenarios: “the clearing of the hero’s name, the [rescuing] of a distressed damsel, or the avenging of a murdered” family member.²² These films were also notorious for reusing footage from past films, as some scenes were too costly to remake for each one. This time, western stars became synonymous with the characters they played. Very rarely did western stars make films other than westerns. For audiences, there was no longer a distinction between the actor and the role.²³ It was also around this time that, based on the well-known moral code of the Old West, Gene Autry came up with the “Cowboy Code,” which was a list of commandments that a cowboy (or person wanting to be a cowboy) must not only live by, but must basically be born having an inherent knowledge of: (1) The Cowboy must never shoot first, hit a smaller man, or take unfair advantage; (2) he must never go back on his word, or a trust confided in him; (3) he must always tell the truth; (4) he must be gentle with children, the elderly, and animals; (5) he must not advocate or possess racially or religiously intolerant ideas; (6) he must help people in distress; (7) he must be a good worker; (8) he must keep himself clean in thought, speech, action, and personal habits; (9) he must respect women, parents, and his nation’s laws; and (10) The Cowboy is a patriot. Other western characters, such as Hopalong Cassidy, Wild Bill Hickock, Roy Rogers, and the Lone Ranger, soon developed similar codes of ethics.

Interestingly enough, B-Westerns contained very little gun fighting until the 1940s. All characters carried guns, but very seldom did they actually use them. In the few scenes where shooting did occur, such as in scenes containing posses or Indians,

²² Ibid., 33.

²³ Edward Buscombe ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Athenaeum, 1988), 36-37.

people were rarely hit. This was for two reasons: one, these films were generally made with children in mind, and it was not considered heroic or moral to shoot people.

Secondly, the films were about action and excitement. B-Westerns in and of themselves were notorious not for their thoughtful plotlines but for the action. Audiences came to see westerns for the daring stunts, and seeing stars jump from stagecoach to a moving horse was far more exciting than solving the conflict with one single gunshot.

Filmmakers “wanted to entertain, not disgust.”²⁴

In the 1940s, the A-Western began to change. Two films, Howard Hughes’ *The Outlaw* (1940) and William Wellman’s *The Ox-Bow Incident* (1942), altered the naivety and wholesomeness that were once associated with westerns. *The Outlaw* brought sex into the mix, even using it to advertise the film. *The Ox-Bow Incident* brought two changes: one, the complexity between what is right and wrong (no longer was it clear) and the complication of the villain’s motives (no longer were they simply after money). These “adult” westerns did not take over the market immediately, as wholesome Roy Rogers became the top money-making western star during the decade. As the 40s came to an end, however, these complicated undertones became plot main-stays and were soon as much a part of the western as wholesomeness originally. It is difficult to draw a conclusion as to why this happened. It is easy to assume that it was because the 1940s were generally dismal years with the existence of the atomic bomb and World War II. However, the ’40s were also the most popular years for the MGM musical. In general, though, Hollywood in the ’40s began producing more cynical and psychological films. Despite this, B-Westerns continued on their own path of simplicity and action, which

²⁴ Brian Garfield, *Western Films: A Complete Guide* (New York: Rawson Associations, 1982), 33-34.

demonstrates just how separate and self-contained the B-Western was from the rest of Hollywood.²⁵

The western theme flourished not only at the movies, but also on the TV screen. The television has a much longer history than one might imagine, with the idea of scanning and transmitting images dating as far back as the 1880s. The world's first working television was made in 1927. The birth of television broadcasting as we know it today was in 1936, when BBC began transmitting the world's first public high-definition service. Though the television became well-known in America with the 1939 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows, World War II prevented it from being manufactured and sold widely. It wasn't until 1948 that true regular commercial network television programming began.²⁶

As the TV started to gain popularity in the United States, many studios prepared for the inevitable in the last part of the 1940s by selling films to television, such as William Boyd's Hopalong Cassidy pictures. Singing cowboy Gene Autry made the transition to television in the late '40s with four new series: *Range Rider*, *Buffalo Bill Jr.*, *Annie Oakley*, and *The Adventures of Champion*. *The Lone Ranger* also made its transition from radio to television in 1948. The 1950s brought an end to series-western films. Allied Artists released in 1954 what is generally known as the last B-Western made as part of a series – *Two Guns and a Badge*.²⁷

At first, many networks held off on producing shows that were meant specifically for television. However, it was soon clear that there was a television market not only for children, but also for adults. During the mid- to late-1950s, television networks produced

²⁵ Edward Buscombe ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Athenaeum, 1988), 43-45.

²⁶ "Television History–The First 75 Years," <http://www.tvhistory.tv> (accessed March 21, 2011).

²⁷ Ibid., 46-48.

such shows as *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp*, *Cheyenne*, *Gunsmoke*, *Wagon Train*, *Maverick*, and *Have Gun, Will Travel*. The first color television western was *Bonanza*. Westerns ruled the 1957-58 season ratings, and by the 1958-59 season, the genre held six of the top seven shows. Not only were these programs much like the western movies in whose footsteps they followed, they were also very similar to each other. Identical themes could easily be recognized in different shows: a “father unable to communicate with his son; a mob unwilling to tolerate different kinds of people and beliefs; a wife who no longer loves her husband; a boy, eager to be recognized as a man; an outsider, eager to become part of a community.” These themes not only permeated westerns, but included cop shows, family dramas, and space shows, such as *Star Trek*.²⁸

With the infiltration of the western to the television screen, the western theme was getting further exposure. Motels, restaurants, and other buildings took on western motifs, as well as RVs and other vehicles, children’s attire and women’s fashion, toys, and comic books. When designing Disneyland in the early 1950s, Walt Disney included an area called Frontierland. In a *New York Times* article printed in February of 1950, the writer said that “today’s youth considers himself practically nude if he is sent out into the streets in anything less than a pair of floppy sheepskins strapped over his roll-bottomed denims, a colored bandanna knotted loosely about the throat of his piped sateen or gabardine shirt, and a wide-brimmed hat settled dashingly about his ears.” America was obsessed with all things western.²⁹

The popularity of the western television show that began for the most part in the 1950s lasted throughout the ’60s, but hit a steep decline by the early 1970s (except for

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Angela F. Keaton, “Backyard Desperadoes: American Attitudes Concerning Toy Guns in the Early Cold War Era,” *The Journal of American Culture*, vol. 33, issue 3 (September 2010): 183.

Little House on the Prairie, often referred to as a ‘Middle-Western’, which hit number one in the ratings in the late ’70s.) One of the main reasons why the western television show declined was not due to a lack of interest, but instead was due to the change in television advertising schemes. Until the end of the 1960s, the only thing that mattered for television studios was how many people were watching their show line-up. However, by the 1970s, demographics began to play an important part in deciding which shows would remain on the air. It was soon realized that western shows had followed in the footsteps of the predecessor B-Westerns; they were mostly watched by children and rural, lower-class, lower paid, less influential people. Since television stations had to sell advertising, not shows, they transitioned to programs that would reach the attentions and interests of a more affluent population. As a result, westerns were out.³⁰

In 1953, 92 western films were made in Hollywood. Ten years later in 1963, only 11 were made.³¹ It seemed the only reason they continued to be made was due to a campy obsession in the 1960s with nostalgia, and simply due to habit.³² Besides the cancellation of western-themed television shows (which consequently had a negative effect on western movies), why did the western movie decline? There are many reasons that may have contributed. One reason may have been that the later westerns lost touch with their roots. They still had all the characteristics of a western, “but the heart and spirit seemed to have gone out” of them³³ and “western films after 1962 (with a few exceptions) displayed neither character nor morality.”³⁴ A clear distinction between good and evil was not easily discernable by audiences, as the “good” guy, in many post-

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., 46-47.

³² Brian Garfield, *Western Films: A Complete Guide* (New York: Rawson Associations, 1982), 34.

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Ibid., 8.

1960 westerns, became merely the toughest guy; the most proficient killer became perforce the best man.”³⁵ Fad filmmakers of the later years “mistook effects for effectiveness; they seemed to prefer style to substance; they confused violence for action...”³⁶ Another reason for the decline may have had to do with technology, which changed the perception of heroism. It was no longer heroic “but merely whimsical to cross the sea in an open boat when it could be done in a few hours in the comfort of a jetliner. After Vietnam, courage was no longer honored; it was no longer acceptable to hate one’s enemies; therefore we ended up hating the only available substitute: ourselves. It was a world into which the virtuous hero on horseback did not fit.”³⁷ Also, compared to the new Space Age obsession, which provided new unexplored frontiers for children to dream about, the Wild West was conquered, outdated, and no longer wild. To further this, most of the original western stars were either deceased or retired, and there was no one to replace them. Another reason for the decline of the western may have been brought on by the new awakening in the 1960s among minority groups who did not appreciate the way they were portrayed on screen. American Indian groups spoke out against the inaccuracy of the films and demanded a change in future productions.³⁸ On the same note, women’s liberation in the 1960s demanded equality, and the characterizations of women in westerns did not parallel this movement. Lastly, it has been noted that a possible reason for the decline in popularity of westerns may have been the fact that studios no longer depended on one genre. The western theme simply had been exhausted, and it was difficult for studios to come up with new, interesting angles.

³⁵ Ibid., 54-55.

³⁶ Ibid., 6.

³⁷ Ibid., 60.

³⁸ Ibid., 53.

This belief was further set in stone with the release of Michael Cimino's *Heaven's Gate*, which was released in 1980. Many critics believe that this one single monstrosity killed the western film overnight due to the excessive costs it accumulated and its complete box office failure. After this, Hollywood executives viewed western films as a terrible risk.³⁹

As it appears, there are many factors that led to the demise of the western film and television show and, consequently, the Wild West as an American obsession.

Surprisingly, the time during which the cowboy roamed freely on the range only lasted from the closing of the Civil War until the 1890s, when railroad tracks and the newly invented barbed wire (put in place by small farmers known as "nesters") began to stifle their herding. During the existence of the Wild West, though,

for a nation built by self-motivated immigrants seeking personal betterment, the West, real or otherwise, always seemed to perpetuate the promise. Here was elbow room and a fresh start – a place to plant and to grow. For a nation fashioned by dreamers, the West was an antidote to crowded cities and failed careers, a refuge for the bold still seeking challenges, a spiritual and geographic last chance to make the dream come true.⁴⁰

But nostalgia reminds us that those were the days of innocence.

³⁹ Edward Buscombe ed., *The BFI Companion to the Western* (New York: Atheneum, 1988), 52-53.

⁴⁰ J. Fred MacDonald, *Who Shot the Sheriff?* (New York: Praeger, 1987), 4.

CHAPTER 2

A Brief History of Theme Parks

A second important contributing element of the Wild West theme park is the development of the theme park in America. Fairs and amusement parks, the precursors to theme parks, have been around for centuries. However, it wasn't until the twentieth century that theme parks came into existence. In order to take a close look at Wild West theme parks, we must examine the history of theme parks, especially in America.

An amusement park is defined as “a commercially operated park having various devices for entertainment, such as a merry-go-round and roller coaster, and usually booths for the sale of food and drink.”⁴¹ An amusement park is different than a fair or carnival in that it is stationary. The term “theme park” is often mistakenly used interchangeably with the term “amusement park.” A theme park is actually a specific type of amusement park that is based on one or more central themes.

Amusement parks have quite a long history. As with western entertainment, amusement parks have an intricate history, so this narrative only skims the surface of the most basic fundamentals. The general consensus of most scholars on the topic is that amusement parks morphed into what they are today from three distinct precedents: periodic fairs, pleasure gardens, and world's fairs. Before we discuss amusement parks, let's take a look at these three elements and how they came to be.

To begin, a fair is defined as “a gathering of buyers and sellers at a particular place and time for trade; a competitive exhibition usually with accompanying

⁴¹ “Amusement park,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (accessed February 2011).

entertainment and amusements.”⁴² Fairs are rooted in pre-history when pagan festivals associated with funerals and worshipping the dead were recorded in both the Stone Age and the Bronze Age. Around 8,000 BC, when the first agricultural revolution began (also called the Neolithic Revolution), man was finally able to grow surplus food, which allowed for trading. Cultures began to mix and mingle, establish trade routes, and set aside grounds for trading to take place.⁴³ A few thousand years later, fairs were specifically recorded in ancient Rome and Greece. Traditionally, these fairs were held within the boundaries of neutral land so that rival peoples could meet to trade, and eventually it became common in imperial Rome for wooden stages to be erected for shows. These ancient fairs, however, lost their original purpose when the sale of slaves took precedence over the trading of surplus crops and other goods.⁴⁴

With the decline of the Roman Empire in the fifth century and eventually the collapse of the feudal system, the new social structure benefitted the craftsman. At the same time, another important agricultural revolution was occurring with the invention of the modern form of the plough and a hinged flail for thrashing. These inventions led to incomparable commercial expansion throughout Europe. Large trading fairs were established and peace among travelers was of foremost importance, as stated in the Magna Carta in 1215, “All merchants shall have safety and security in coming into England and going out of England, and in staying and in traveling through England, as well by land as by water, to buy and sell without any unjust exactions according to ancient and right customs....”⁴⁵ The most important fair of the time was the fair held

⁴² “Fair,” *Merriam-Webster.com*, 2011, <http://www.merriam-webster.com> (accessed February 2011).

⁴³ David Braithwaite, *Fairground Architecture* (London: Hugh Evelyn, 1968), 13.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

every year in September at Stourbridge. Anything one can imagine was sold there, from clothing, animals, and food to hand-crafted goods such as baskets, iron work, pottery, and much more. Beginning in 1211, the fair evolved over time to include performances, games, competitions, drinking, and eventually fairs took on a less wholesome image due to the types of people that enjoyed these amusements. Stourbridge became plagued with insidious behavior, and to combat this, the fair committee did such things as prohibit the more sinister games of chance, forbid vulgar performances, and raise costs. Eventually, the fair ended in 1604.⁴⁶

Another well-known early fair was Bartholomew Fair, also in England. Sometime in the early twelfth century Monk Rahere, who was former jester to Henry I, was given a charter to build a hospital and priory on the Smithfield Common. In the 1130s, in order to raise money for the new buildings, Rahere put on a ten-day fair that was to follow Bartholomew's Day in August. The fair was a commercial event, with traders invited to sell their wares, as well as farmers and craftsmen with their leather, cloth, metalwork, pewter, livestock, crops, and other items. After the first year, the fair continued as a commercial operation for five centuries. However, it became apparent by the 1600s that people continued to visit the fair because of the food, festive atmosphere, and wandering performers, so the fair was extended to three weeks duration and the focus became entertainment instead of commercial and trade. By the 1700s, most booths and shows charged a penny for admission and used lamps and other lighting techniques to catch the attention of fairgoers. With the fair becoming a center for entertainment instead of commerce, it gained the reputation as being a rough and somewhat sinister carnival. By the nineteenth century, the fair was overrun by unruly and criminal patrons. In an

⁴⁶ Ibid.

attempt to eliminate crime and mob riots, officials shortened the length of the fair, raised rent for booths, and banned many of the more raucous games. This did not stop the unruliness, though, and like the Stourbridge Fair two centuries earlier, the Bartholomew Fair was forced to close in 1855.⁴⁷

As the nineteenth century moved forward, new forms of technology brought changes that the world had never seen before. Electricity, steam-power, instantaneous communication, and railroads catapulted civilization ahead in a way that made continued progress seem unstoppable. Consumer goods were produced at rapid speeds, and the distribution of these goods was even faster. Trade fairs began to lose their importance and traveling showmen had to adapt quickly. They did so by using the new inventions, such as electricity and steam, as well as focusing on a new type of people to entertain: the working class. And they changed the fairs of trade into fairs of pleasure, with bright lights, vivid colors, loud music, and thrilling new amusement rides. The transition was so successful that in 1889, the United Kingdom Van-Dwellers' Protection Association was formed to protect the business of the traveling showman. It was later known as the Showmen's Guild, and was registered in 1918 as a Trade Union.⁴⁸

Eventually, these temporary pleasure fairs, or carnivals, became enclosed and visitors were charged an entrance fee. Carnival companies were first organized in 1894, and by the next year, fifteen of these companies were in operation in America. The carnival business continued to expand rapidly through the early twentieth century, which was both a blessing and a curse for the industry. Many of these carnivals were well-run with honesty and good intentions, but many were not. Some carnival owners who had

⁴⁷ Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 1-3.

⁴⁸ David Braithwaite, *Fairground Architecture* (London: Hugh Evelyn, 1968), 17-20.

little invested in their shows, allowed gambling, cheating, and vulgar displays, all in hopes of getting a little more money out of visitors. Many were guilty of bribing local officials in order to protect themselves from being charged with any illegal acts. All carnivals, even the well-operated ones, gained sinister reputations and many towns and cities prohibited them from setting up within their boundaries.⁴⁹

It is difficult to say when the first fair was held in the United States. It appears that one of the first county fairs on record was held in York, Pennsylvania in 1765 after permission was granted from William Penn's son, Thomas, who held the position of Proprietor of the Colony of Pennsylvania for the Crown of England.⁵⁰ The concept began to spread as agricultural reformers organized exhibitions to share modern methods of farming.⁵¹ Beginning in the early- to mid- nineteenth century, states organized agricultural societies to promote the improvement. The first state fair appears to have been organized by the New York State Agricultural Society and held in Syracuse, New York in 1841.⁵²

Today, the world's largest fair is Oktoberfest, held in Munich, Bavaria, Germany, for sixteen to eighteen days each year. It began in 1810 as a celebration thrown by the Bavarian royalty in honor of Prince Ludwig's marriage to Princess Therese of Saxony-Hildburghausen. The party included a horse race and had an astonishing attendance of forty-thousand people. The following year, the party happened again, although instead of

⁴⁹ Miodrag Mitrasinovic, *Total Landscape, Theme Parks, Public Space* (Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2006), 32-33.

⁵⁰ York County Agricultural Society, "York Fair: Get Your Tail to the Fair," <http://www.yorkfair.org/history.htm> (accessed January 2012).

⁵¹ "County Fairs," *The Encyclopedia of Chicago*, <http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/345.html> (accessed April 2013).

⁵² "New York State Fair," *The Encyclopedia of New York*, <http://www.syracuseuniversitypress.syr.edu/encyclopedia/entries/new-york-state-fair.html> (accessed April 2013).

focusing on the Prince's marriage, it was centered on the horse race and an agricultural show put on to boost Bavaria's agricultural economy. Though the horse race no longer occurs and the agricultural show is put on every third year, the party still rages on, attracting more than six-million people each year. Four of the largest state fairs in the United States are held in Minnesota, Texas, Iowa and Ohio, which last anywhere from two to four weeks and have an attendance rate of around one-million each year. These fairs stay connected to their roots by having shows and competitions in various realms, such as livestock, baking, crafts, and the rodeo. They continue to stay current by providing games, rides, midways, and shows put on by famous singers and performing groups.⁵³

The second element that helped lead to the creation of amusement parks is the pleasure garden. A pleasure garden is usually a garden that is open to the public for recreation, but in addition to plantings, contains entertainment such as concert halls, zoos, or rides. How they began varied depending on the region. French pleasure gardens grew from small gardens that added more entertainment as they became more popular, while English pleasure gardens tended to stem from inns or taverns. The "heyday of the gardens coincides with the Industrial Revolution in England, and no doubt a desire to preserve idyllic, natural settings amid the smoke, soot, and gray dinginess of the factory environment was a motivating factor for creating and patronizing these gardens."⁵⁴ They included things such as fanciful structures, elaborate landscaping, fountains, great illumination (which was wonderful for people of the time who were used to sitting in

⁵³ Beth Greenfield, "America's Top State Fairs (of Summer)," <http://www.forbes.com/sites/bethgreenfield/2012/07/12/americas-top-state-fairs-of-summer> (accessed April 2013).

⁵⁴ Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 4.

dimly lit homes at night), fireworks, concerts and theater performances, sports, food and drink stands, places for dancing, and balloon ascensions.⁵⁵ Eventually, the gardens became known as centers of sin and vice just as fairs did; however, unlike fairs, it was precisely because of this reputation that the gardens remained popular. It was a way for the upper-crust of society to temporarily escape the moral restrictions that their place in society created; however, these gardens were places of controlled risk and danger where they weren't actually risking their reputations.⁵⁶ The gardens remained popular because "these highly theatrical settings projected their own utopian vision: a new, harmonious sense of community built around the consumption of pleasure."⁵⁷ Three of the most well-known pleasure gardens were London's Vauxhall and Ranelagh, and the Prater in Vienna, which began as a pleasure garden and eventually morphed into one of today's most thrilling amusement parks.

Vauxhall Gardens, the first internationally known pleasure garden, was established in 1661 as a twelve-acre sylvan garden where fashionable visitors entered free of charge and could walk amidst the lush greenery. It began its transition to an amusement park in 1728 when ownership switched hands. Thousands of lamps were added, as well as an exotic structure to house musical and theatrical performances. By 1737, visitors were charged an entry fee, but this did not hinder the lower-class population from visiting. Much of its intrigue lay in the fact that classes were able to mingle. Lower-class citizens felt privileged to be mingling with members of the titled class, while the titled class found it amusing to be amongst the working classes. In the

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Karal Ann Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance* (New York: Flammarion, 1997), 20.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

later years of the eighteenth century, fireworks displays were fired every night, thousands more lamps were added, balloon ascensions became common, and dramatic reenactments of important events (such as the Battle of Waterloo) became popular. When ownership changed hands again in 1821, Vauxhall began a gradual decline and finally closed in 1859.⁵⁸

Ranelagh Gardens, notable for its financing scheme, opened in London in 1742. Funding was obtained from several shareholders who developed the grounds and built a grand rotunda for performances. The upper-crust members of society frequented the place in their most fashionable attire to sip tea and coffee, hear performances by Mozart and Handel, and to see fireworks displays and reproductions of volcanic eruptions. Ranelagh closed in 1803 after it lost its appeal among bourgeois society.⁵⁹

The celebrated Prater, in Vienna, Austria, is still open today, occupying two-thousand acres of parkland. It began in 1766 when Emperor Joseph II opened his former hunting grounds to be used as a park by the Viennese people. He carefully landscaped the property, even planting full-grown trees so that visitors could immediately enjoy the shade. He envisioned the park as a place of natural beauty to which people of all social classes could escape the urban environment, mingle with one another, and participate in the musical and theatrical culture of the city. Soon after the park opened, the king allowed the opening of concession and entertainment booths, as well as the construction of primitive rides. In the late eighteenth century, fireworks displays were added to the repertoire. The Prater is even credited with bringing the railroad to the people of Austria. When Franz von Gerstner built the first railroad in Austria in 1823, the skeptical

⁵⁸ Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 4-6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

population did not see it as a dependable and practical mode of transportation. Von Gerstner quick-mindedly placed a railroad near the Prater so that the people would view it as one of the park's thrilling amusement rides. The aura of danger surrounding the railroad faded eventually, and citizens could finally view it for what it was – an efficient mode of transport.⁶⁰ The Vienna World's Fair was held at the park in 1873, which brought in the more thrilling amusement machines. The garden became noisy and rambunctious, and this is when the concept of lively amusement parks was born.⁶¹ Though the Prater did experience its fair share of criminal activity as it became a gathering place for the more unsavory members of society, it endured the roughest of times and still survives today.

The third precedent for the creation of modern amusement parks, and arguably the most influential, is the world's fair. The first World's Fair was held in 1851 at the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park, London, United Kingdom. Entitled "Great Exhibitions of the Works of Industry of All Nations," the fair was reportedly conceived from an idea of Prince Albert's and became the first international exhibition of manufactured goods. The concept "evolved from the national manufacturing exhibitions that grew with the industrial revolution."⁶² For a couple of decades prior to "The Great Exhibition," France had been hosting national expositions, with the largest being the French Industrial Exposition held in Paris in 1844. That concept began spreading across Europe before it finally hit London in 1851, where it became international in scope.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 7-9.

⁶¹ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History* (Seacaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1976), 34.

⁶² Michael Sorkin, ed., *Variations on a Theme Park: The New American City and the End of Public Space* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 208.

Though the first true North American World's Fair took place in 1853 in New York City, one of the most influential World's Fair on the inception of theme parks was the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893, which stirred imaginations as well as criticisms. "The White City," as it was popularly called, was labeled the Columbia Exposition because it belatedly celebrated the four-hundredth anniversary of Columbus's discovery of the New World. It gave us the Ferris wheel, the official beginning of the midway (the amusement area), and most importantly, the creation of the modern-day enclosed fair. Its successful combination of entertainment, engineering, and education within intricately designed landscapes and architecture set a standard that American amusement parks from Coney Island to Disney had to follow. Architectural critic Montgomery Schuyler stated that the exposition had such a profound cultural influence due to its successful integration of three design elements: unity, magnitude, and illusion. His words have continued to be true, as even present-day amusement enterprises blend these factors.

Within the White City's Midway, reproductions of villages from around the world were scattered. Irish, German, African, Javanese, Algerian and Tunisian villages, just to name a few, created an exotic escape for visitors where they could be "educated" on anthropology from around the globe. The concept of the Midway became a staple in later amusement park planning. The Ferris wheel was also placed in the Midway and was perhaps the only reason the exposition made a profit. The wheel opened almost two months later than the fair, and it was at this time that the disappointing attendance numbers began to increase. People saw that new technology, which was generally

viewed as something used to improve upon machines of industry, could be used to create machines of pleasure and entertainment.⁶³

The exposition brought us some other innovations. The first elevated railway transported visitors within the park; this led to Chicago's elevated "Loop," which was built four years later, and eventually, to the monorail at the Disney parks. Also, movable sidewalks made their debut at the exposition, carrying visitors on benches down a mile-long pier.⁶⁴

Electricity, public comfort, and cleanliness were three other aspects of the exposition that had not been fully realized in amusement venues before the exposition. John P. Barrett was in charge of electricity for the White City. He artfully presented it in a fun but useful way to the public, and made sure that each building was planned with the use of electricity as a priority in the design. Barrett's dedication to electricity at the exposition eliminated much of the mystery surrounding the relatively new invention and proved that it was a dependable source of light that could be put to much wider use in commercial development. The exposition was also the first to plan extensively for the facilities needed to ensure the comfort of the visitors. Though these services were addressed in earlier fairs, sanitation, sewage, and protective services had not always been part of the comprehensive plan. In the White City, there was plenty of drinking water available to visitors, as well as 4,011 public toilets, which was a vast improvement on the pitiful 250 toilets at the Paris Exposition just four years earlier in 1889. There was even a Bureau of Public Comfort for the fair that ensured the availability of medical services, as well as waiting rooms and plenty of hotel accommodations for visitors from around the

⁶³ Ibid., 28-29.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 37.

world. The White City even had its own fire and police departments. Cleanliness was also of the utmost importance at the exposition. The grounds were swept every night. Advertisement flyers were severely limited, and types of foods were highly regulated on a basis of cleanliness and waste creation. Great provisions were made in the planning of the removal of garbage and sewage, which was an inspiration for Walt Disney when he began planning his parks.⁶⁵

Alan Tractenberg summed up the World's Columbian Exposition beautifully: "For a summer's moment, White City had seemed the fruition of a nation, a culture, a whole society: the celestial city of man set upon a hill for all the world to behold." No matter how futuristic and technologically advanced the modern amusement parks seem, they are all offspring of the White City.⁶⁶

Amusement parks, the culmination of the various ideas and activities of periodic fairs, pleasure gardens, and world's fairs, began in Europe as early as the seventeenth century. The oldest continuously operating park is Bakken "The Hill" in Kalmbenborg just north of Copenhagen, Denmark, which began in 1583 as a natural spring for the general public and turned quickly into an amusement park once entertainers and artists began to frequent the place. Tivoli Gardens, also in Copenhagen, is the second oldest still-operating amusement park in the world, opened in 1843. Tivoli was a strategic move by King Christian VIII, who granted the land to Georg Carstensen after he pointed out to the king that if the citizens had somewhere to be amused, then they would not worry about politics.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ Ibid., 38-39.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 39-40.

⁶⁷ Anthony and Patricia Wylson, *Theme Parks, Leisure Centres, Zoos and Aquaria* (Essex, England: Longman Group UK Limited, 1994), 5-9.

Amusement parks in the western hemisphere developed when colonists came to the United States and set up picnic groves that eventually turned into amusement areas. The first of these American picnic areas was Jones's Wood in New York City, which was established in the early 1800s in present-day Upper East Side, along the East River. It consisted of 153 acres and eventually contained such activities as bowling, billiards, shooting galleries, gymnastic equipment, wrestling matches, foot races, donkey rides, crude merry-go-rounds, and simple swings for children. There were also areas for refreshments, as well as music and dancing, but the most popular activity was beer drinking. The walkways were flanked on both sides with tents and booths full of people selling wares and performing stunts. The area provided plenty of space to allow for large crowds. In fact, a political rally on behalf of Democratic presidential candidate Stephen A. Douglas in 1860 attracted a crowd of thirty thousand. That same year, the park held the national Shooting Festival. As New York City grew, Jones's Wood became surrounded by tenements and was eventually swallowed up by development.^{68 69}

The next advancement in American amusement parks came during the last decade of the nineteenth century when the country witnessed the development of electric trolley lines in most of its large cities. The companies that built the trolley lines are credited with the phenomenon of amusement parks becoming an American institution. In order to increase ridership numbers on weekends (trolleys were normally used by people going to work or doing shopping during the week), the companies built parks and recreation areas at the ends of the trolley lines to lure urban dwellers to the country-like leisure areas. The

⁶⁸ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History* (Seacaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1976), 37.

⁶⁹ William F. Mangels, *The Outdoor Amusement Industry: From Earliest Times to the Present* (New York: Vantage Press, Inc., 1952), 18-19.

admission-free parks were an instant success, so much so that the trolley companies began to depend principally on money made from park-excursion riders, especially in the summer, and even decreased the cost of day-to-day tickets during the week. Some trolley parks could draw fifty-thousand people on a single Sunday or summer holiday. As the parks continued to rise in popularity, they expanded and grew to include different activities and entertainments, such as dance halls, mechanical amusement rides, sports fields, boat rides, and restaurants. Historian Judith Adams writes that there were between 1,500 and 2,000 trolley parks in existence in America by 1919, which was the peak of the trolley-park era.⁷⁰

The parks were maintained as inexpensive, clean, family-friendly escapes for the multitudes. Even the ride from the neighborhoods to the parks was relaxing, as the electric trolleys were much quieter and cleaner than the steam railroads that most people were used to riding. Trolley companies advertised nightly specials that included colorfully illuminated cars with bands playing music onboard. Once riders arrived at the parks, they were surrounded by other visitors dressed in their Sunday best. Most of the trolley parks prohibited alcoholic beverages and games of chance, which kept the grounds peaceful and family-friendly.⁷¹

Trolley parks remained an American obsession until the 1920s when automobiles began replacing trolleys as the primary way for people to travel. Automobiles also

⁷⁰ Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 57-60.

⁷¹ Ibid.

served as the foremost source of entertainment.⁷² People could now escape to places that were farther than the end of the trolley line.

The next and one of the most important developments in American amusement parks was marked by the establishment of Coney Island in New York City. Coney Island not only brought trends to the amusement park industry that are still used today, but also was a precursor in establishing the experiences people went through when visiting Wild West theme parks: an element of controlled risk and the park's control of the visitors experience. Unlike its predecessors, in its heyday Coney Island strove to be a place of insanity and chaos to which the masses could escape from the drab and dirty urban areas of New York City. Until Disneyland opened in the mid-1950s, Coney Island was the epitome of the American amusement park tradition. The "essence of Coney Island was its juxtaposition of mechanical amusement devices with an atmosphere of illusion and chaos. The precision and predictability of gears, wheels, and electricity created a fantasyland of disorder, the unexpected, emotional excess, and sensory overload. The brilliant paradox that was Coney, besides generating fun and frolic, allowed members of the growing urban class, many of whom were immigrants or born of immigrant parents, to assimilate and participate in a culture ever more dominated by the machine."⁷³

However, in its beginning stages, Coney Island was simply a resort area for city-dwellers to sunbathe by the water. Other similar areas included Atlantic City, New Jersey, Riverside Park near Springfield, Massachusetts, and Lake Compounce in Bristol, Connecticut.

⁷² Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History* (Seacaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1976), 121.

⁷³ Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 41.

Coney Island was first settled by a group of Dutch immigrants in 1643. The land was officially acquired from the native Canarsie Indians in 1654. Coney Island remained virtually untouched until 1829 when Shell Road was laid out and the Coney Island House Hotel was constructed. Coney Island House became a popular summer beach resort at which famous guests would stay to enjoy the idyllic setting and solitude of the beach. By 1850, the island was becoming very popular, and a plank road was constructed, along with more hotels, bathhouses, beer halls, and pavilions that stretched out over the ocean. Horse-drawn streetcars began carrying passengers to Coney from Brooklyn in the 1850s, and by the early 1870s, passengers could board a steamboat from the city to Coney for fifty cents. In 1875, the Prospect Park and Coney Island Railroad was completed, which became a quick and dependable mode of transportation that cost only thirty-five cents. Because of the railroad, business and enterprise flooded the area, as well as visitors, whose numbers increased from the thousands to the millions. A handful of elegant hotels were built between 1874 and 1880 to meet the needs of the visitors, both upper and middle class, one such being the Manhattan Beach Hotel constructed in 1876, which was the most fashionable resort in the United States for thirty years.^{74 75} In 1883, the Brooklyn Bridge was constructed, allowing the masses to flood to Coney: “summer Sundays [on] Coney Island’s beach [became] the most densely occupied place in the world.”⁷⁶

From the beginning, Coney Island seemed to have an involvement with the more sinister and pleasure-seeking nature of the population. Con artists, prostitutes, drunks,

⁷⁴ Ibid., 42.

⁷⁵ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History* (Seacaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1976), 62.

⁷⁶ Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1994) 33.

and gamblers frequented the area as it became more popular. Their activities were tolerated thanks to Coney Island's "Boss" John McKane. By 1884, McKane served as police chief, town supervisor, head of the board of health, and for appearance's sake, superintendent of Sunday schools. He had the authority to lease areas of land for concessions and entertainment, as well as regulate what kind of activities took place on the leased areas. He not only rewarded his friends with jobs that benefited him, but was also known for fixing elections. In 1893, McKane attacked and jailed poll watchers who were sent to Coney to oversee the current election, and he was sent to Sing Sing prison as a result. With McKane gone, Coney Island could finally reach its potential as the center for thrills.⁷⁷

As a mecca for entertainment, Coney Island contained many ways to be amused. In the 1880s, three of America's biggest and most successful racetracks were built on the island: Gravesend, Sheepshead Bay, and Brighton Beach. Coney Island Athletic Club sat ten-thousand people and was the world's capital of boxing. The first official amusement was brought from the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition in 1877: the Iron Tower, which stood three-hundred feet high and had an elevator to the top with a telescope. Many rides scattered Coney by 1894, but there was no official grouping and they were all privately owned. In 1895, Sea Lion Park became the first enclosed amusement park. Shortly after, three more enclosed amusement parks were constructed: Steeplechase, Luna, and Dreamland.

Steeplechase Park was opened in 1897 by George C. Tilyou. Tilyou was raised on Coney and after honeymooning at the World's Columbian Exposition and witnessing the Ferris wheel, he decided to open his own park. He offered to buy the Ferris wheel

⁷⁷ Adams, 42-43.

when the fair was over, but when his offer was rejected, he decided to build a smaller wheel. Based on the idea of Paul Boyton's small Sea Lion Park, Tilyou wanted to create a space where he could scatter his various amusement rides and concessions while keeping the more seedy aspects of Coney away. He wanted to create a safe place where thrill seekers could escape the everyday expectations of social rules. Tilyou charged twenty-five cents to enter his "Funny Place," as he called it, which was the advent of the "pay-one-price" ticket at amusement parks. He named his park Steeplechase because his main attraction was a ride that consisted of eight wooden double-saddled horses that raced along a rolling track. Tillyou's "brilliance was in transforming his patrons into the entertainment. All the visitors to Steeplechase Park unwittingly became the means by which social proprieties were shattered. Sudden disorientation, loss of balance, exposure of flesh, unaccustomed and rather intimate contact with strangers of the opposite sex, public shame, and strenuous physical activity resulted in a tremendous sense of release. Escape and illusion were also part of the formula."⁷⁸ Steeplechase was successful because it ran on the belief that "half the world likes to show off and the other less daring half is perpetually interested in the performance. And it believes that pretty legs, no matter how trite, are never dull, and that ugly ones are always funny."⁷⁹ Steeplechase survived fires, the Great Depression, two world wars, and cultural changes until it closed in the 1960s.⁸⁰

Luna Park opened in 1903. It was started by Frederic Thompson and Skip Dundy, who designed a ride for the Pan-American Exposition in Buffalo, NY in 1901. The ride, called "A Trip to the Moon" was a cyclorama show that depicted a space shuttle ride to

⁷⁸ Ibid., 46.

⁷⁹ Ibid.,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 43-46.

the moon. Thompson and Dundy had recreated the ride for Tilyou's Steeplechase Park, but after the 1902 season, they pulled out their ride and placed it their enclosed park, the newly purchased Sea Lion Park. Thompson and Dundy expanded the small and modest Sea Lion Park into a 22-acre amusement extravaganza and renamed it Luna Park. Thompson, who studied architecture as a student, created "a lavish, sumptuously ornamental, electric Baghdad."⁸¹ The park was illuminated with 250,000 lights, which was the greatest concentration of electricity ever attempted. Unlike Tilyou, who relied on sanitized sex, Thompson and Dundy played on the idea of fantasy, motion, and illumination. They advertised it as a "place for your mother, your sister, and your sweetheart."⁸² Visitors were surrounded by opulence and foreign-themed excitement, which was a drastic change from the drabness of the dirty urban setting in Manhattan and surrounding areas. Along with amusement rides, there were shows and regularly scheduled "disaster" events, such as the repeated burning of a building complete with a cast of firefighters and building dwellers, recreations of the Galveston flood of 1900, and the eruption of Mt. Vesuvius and the resulting fall of Pompeii.⁸³ This was also where Dr. Martin Arthur Couney displayed the first mechanical baby incubator, which he developed in the 1890s. Luna was so successful that during the second year, over four-million people visited. This number is amazing when comparing it to current amusement park attendance: today, only the top eight theme parks in the United States (which are either part of Disney or Universal Studios) draw more the four-million visitors a year. Skip Dundy died in 1907, and Thompson followed him in death in 1919, at which time Luna

⁸¹ Ibid., 49.

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ These illusionary rides were the precursors to the rides at modern-day Universal Studios. Rides at Universal include reenactments of tornadoes, earthquakes and shark attacks, as well as fictional rides that center around alien and mummy attacks.

Park was purchased by a group of businessmen who didn't realize the importance of investing money back into the park. Luna quickly began to fall to ruins. Two major renovations in 1935 and 1941 proved to be too late, as they did not help increase visitor numbers. Luna Park finally burned to the ground in 1946.

Dreamland Park is the third of the important enclosed parks to be constructed on Coney Island. Dreamland was different than Steeplechase and Luna, however, because it is known for its failure. Politician William H. Reynolds and a few other venture capitalists hoped to cash in on the financial successes of Steeplechase and Luna by building an even bigger, more extravagant park. In 1904, Dreamland opened with its classic-styled buildings and one-million electric lights that outshined Luna's 250,000. Everything that Steeplechase and Luna did, Dreamland attempted to do better. It very much mirrored the educational and refined atmosphere of Chicago's White City. However, the investors misinterpreted the desires of the people. Visitors to Coney Island wanted thrills and chaos, not culture and refinement, and soon the unimpressive number of visitors could not support the cost to run the place. The owners were politicians and businessmen, not showmen, and they proved to be epic failures in the world of amusement. In May of 1911, Dreamland caught fire, which spread to most of the Coney Island strip. Coney Island saw one of its most populous days the morning after, as practically everyone from New York City clamored out to see the ashy ruins of Dreamland.⁸⁴

During the early decades of the twentieth century, Coney Island continued to draw over one-million visitors a day on summer weekends. As with future visitors to Wild West Theme parks, visitors to Coney Island simply arrived at the amusement center

⁸⁴ Ibid., 52-53.

and proceeded without much effort to be entertained in the way that each of the parks was designed to entertain. Also, the idea of controlled risk with the perceived “danger” associated with falling off of a wild ride at Coney or being caught in the middle of a “real” shootout at a Wild West Theme Park created an exhilarating experience for visitors. Coney’s success paralleled New York City’s substantial increase in population between 1850 and 1940, which grew from 700,000 people to over 7.5 million during those years.⁸⁵ However, by the mid-twentieth century, Coney began its slow decline. One thing that led to Coney’s demise was the increase in the average age of New York City’s population. The island’s attractions were designed to appeal to people between the ages of fifteen and thirty. Coney Island’s best year was 1910, when the majority of New York City’s population was young. As the city’s population aged, the appeal of Coney Island became less. By 1950, the largest population segment of the city was between the ages of 25-54 years old.⁸⁶ For many of these citizens, raising the family took precedence over the thrills of Coney. A second reason for the fluctuation of Coney Island’s visitor numbers through the years was the opening of the amusement parks at a time when the working class was working less hours and earning more expenditure money. Between 1890 and 1925, industrialization and an increase in organized labor greatly reduced the work hours per week and increased the amount of pay, which, timing-wise, coincided with the opening of the parks on Coney Island. With more time for leisure and more money to pay for it, the population was looking for ways to relax and Coney provided that new, exciting way to escape the city.⁸⁷ However, as the Great Depression hit in 1929, wages decreased, and the eventual onset of World War II did not create a desirable

⁸⁵ Ibid, 53.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid, 53-55.

atmosphere for thrill-seekers and money was spent on less frivolous things. By the time the war was finished and people were ready to spend again, Coney had lost its luster. The population had aged and many moved on to more modern ways of amusement and entertainment. Automobiles allowed New York City's population to travel to less crowded beaches. The third reason was social change. As with many amusement parks, Coney Island suffered its last blow when it became a hang out for urban gangs in the 1950s and 60s. Robert Moses furthered this when he, offended by the tawdry entertainment that Coney had to offer, he re-zoned the island for residential purposes and constructed low-income housing. The danger associated with gang violence decreased visitor numbers greatly. After the closing of the last amusement park in 1964, people still traveled to Coney to spend the day at the beach and ride the few remaining rides, but the visitor numbers continued to dwindle and never matched what they once were in the early twentieth century.

The next major development in American amusement parks was brought about by Walter Elias Disney, who is often credited with originating the concept of the themed amusement park. Whether or not this is true, we can say that he was the first to make the park experience part of a bigger package with television shows, movies, toys, park rides, and costumed characters.⁸⁸

While Walt Disney began making animated shorts in the 1920s and full-length animated films in the 1930s, it wasn't until the early 1950s that he began planning his theme park. He hired art directors instead of architects to design the park, and the first sketches were drawn up for Disney's theme park during a visit to Walter Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, California. The story of Knott's Berry Farm began when Knott

⁸⁸ Ibid., 105-112.

became the owner of a successful berry farm around 1920. In the early '30s, his wife started making chicken dinners and selling them to customers of the farm's berry stand. Her dinners became so famous that the yard was always populated by people waiting to get some of her chicken. In 1940, Knott began purchasing abandoned buildings from old western towns, as well as old trains and old mining equipment, to set up in the yard to entertain waiting customers. Knott wasn't unique in his love for nostalgia, as it seems many Americans during the 1940s through the '60s were very much into old trains and antiques, anything that reminded them of the old West, where they came from, and of an "authentic, supposedly more full-filling past."⁸⁹ Many adults of the era connected these antiques to fond childhood memories or days that no longer existed, the days of steam locomotives and life on the frontier. Knott even printed a monthly magazine called *Ghost Town News* that was devoted to stories of the way things were back in the nineteenth-century West. Eventually, his little transplanted western village became an attraction of its own, and grew into what it is today.⁹⁰ Disney was someone who connected "Americana" antiques with his childhood and with the story of America, so Knott's Berry Farm was particularly inspirational to him. When Disneyland opened in Anaheim, California in 1955, Disney was quoted as saying that he didn't "want to just entertain kids with pony rides and swings. [He wanted] them to learn something about their heritage."⁹¹ Other inspirational experiences throughout his life included childhood visits to the American World's Fairs and a visit with his wife to Tivoli Gardens in Denmark.

⁸⁹ Sorkin, 201.

⁹⁰ Karal Ann Marling, *Designing Disney's Theme Parks: The Architecture of Reassurance* (New York: Flammarion, 1997), 42-43.

⁹¹ Ibid., 32.

When Disneyland opened, it occupied 85 acres and consisted of five themed lands: Main Street, U.S.A., Adventureland, Frontierland, Fantasyland, and Tomorrowland. Main Street, U.S.A. was modeled after a typical Midwestern main street, as Disney drew much of his influence for this land from his hometown of Marceline, Missouri. Adventureland was designed to look like a tropical land, exuding exoticism and mystery, while Fantasyland brought to life childhood stories, such as Peter Pan, Snow White, and Alice in Wonderland. Disney's nod to the American West was in Frontierland, which recreated American pioneer days on the Western frontier (Disney also acknowledged the adventurous spirit associated with "heading west" in the creation of Tom Sawyer Island, where children and adults could explore the "wild" land.) Tomorrowland was designed around the Space Age theme, with much focus being on visions of the future. All five lands were built around Sleeping Beauty Castle, which served as the central point of the park.

Disney opened his park during a dip in the popularity of amusement parks. As cars and the television became the most popular sources of entertainment in the 1950s, many of the older, traditional parks were forced to close or were headed in that direction. Disney, however, used the popularity of television to his advantage and began promoting his park with TV shows and other advertising campaigns years before Disneyland opened. Other parks at the time caught on to Disney's ingenious idea and advertised on television as well, or featured television characters at their parks. After Disneyland opened, a lot of what visitors saw inside the park were scenes and characters from Disney's movies and television shows. Each land referred to specific ongoing Disney projects. For instance, Frontierland included material from his live-action westerns made

for television, such as Davy Crockett. Disney's original inspiration for Frontierland, however, was western movies. Seeing characters and settings from television in real life was a new experience for people, and it added an element of excitement to the visit. Disney also made sure to keep the park spotlessly clean and manicured, with plenty of items necessary for visitors' comfort, such as restrooms, concessions, seating, and drinking fountains. He kept a strict policy on who was hired to work at the park, paying close attention to the way employees looked and how they dressed. Based on the success of his brain-child, Disney began planning another park in the early 1960s simply called *The Florida Project*. Though Disney died before construction broke ground, the new park opened in 1971 as the Magic Kingdom in Orlando, Florida and has since grown into Walt Disney World Resort, the most-visited entertainment resort in the world.

Disneyland gave the amusement park industry a much-needed boost and set the standard for future parks. As people saw the popularity and success of Disney's park, entrepreneurs and corporations began to see theme parks as a smart investment. Private, family-owned parks were replaced by corporate-owned operations, built with capital investment. Most ventures failed, but some were quite successful.⁹² The first successful park based on the Disney model was the regional theme park Six Flags Over Texas, which opened in 1961 in Arlington, Texas. The opening of Six Flags created the competitive theme park industry. Other theme parks continued to open throughout the 60s and 70s, which accounts for most of today's major parks. The 70s also saw a maturation of the remaining existing parks, as they brought in bigger and more thrilling rides to keep up with the competitive amusement park industry.⁹³ The new generation of

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid.

amusement parks was designed using a very different model from the trolley parks. The corporations behind Six Flags were careful in choosing locations for the parks. They had to be located close to metropolitan areas, but just far enough out that they could not be accessed by public transportation. This kept away the crime attributed to inner-city residents (which was generally believed to be the reason for the demise of many of the original parks). When possible, the parks were located on the interstate system, which allowed families who mainly traveled by automobile. There also had to be plenty of room for parking facilities and for potential expansion. Just as at Disneyland, Six Flags emphasized cleanliness and hospitality, with attractive landscaping and facilities, and strict employee cleanliness. Six Flags reworked the Disney model to suit its needs, though. Unlike Disneyland, Six Flags offered an all-inclusive ticket price that allowed visitors to enter the park and ride the rides as often as they pleased. This ticket system eventually became the industry standard. Six Flags also made thrilling rides their main attraction, as well as first-rate shows and performances.⁹⁴

Disneyland, with its suspension of space, time, weather, and reality, led to yet another phenomenon: that “any geographic, cultural, or mythical location, whether supplied by fictional texts, historical locations, or futuristic projections, could be reconfigured as a setting for entertainment.”⁹⁵ Today, common everyday locations like shopping malls, hotels, restaurants, nightclubs, even interstate rest areas, are constructed to mimic what used to exist in its place, but an amped-up, clean version that doesn’t contain any negative realities. Quincy Market in Boston, Fisherman’s Wharf in San Francisco, and Harbor Place in Baltimore are examples of existing areas that have been

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Sorkin, 16.

“Disneyfied,” or cleaned of all realities and grime, to create sparkling versions of its original form in order to attract tourism and the masses.⁹⁶ According to architect Michael Sorkin, “the new theme parks now visit you, wherever you may be: the disappearance of the real is no longer revealingly concealed.”⁹⁷

Now that we’ve examined the history of the development of the amusement park industry, let’s take a look at the reasons for the rise and decline of the popularity of the amusement park industry. The Gilded Age is known as the “Golden Age” of amusement parks, and it lasted from the turn of the twentieth century until the early 1920s. As mentioned earlier, it was during this time that Americans achieved a level of relative economic ease, with fewer work hours and more disposable income, and with the convenient locations of amusement parks in both urban and rural areas, the population flocked to the parks to be entertained by mechanized fantasy worlds. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census data, weekly work hours steadily declined from 1890 to 1925, while at the same time the average annual earnings for workers in manufacturing and service industries dramatically increased. This was due to industrialization, unionization, and economic stimulus generated by World War I. The most dramatic decrease in work hours and increase in income (though offset by inflation at the time) occurred during and directly after World War I, and discretionary income showed a significant increase. There was also a change in attitude about how people spent their time and money that fed into the rise in popularity of amusement parks. During this time, going to motion pictures and traveling by car were among America’s most popular ways to be entertained. Both of these forms of entertainment allowed for the person to take part in the activity

⁹⁶ Margaret Crawford, *The Ecology of Fantasy*, Forum Publication #3 (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Forum for Architecture and Urban Design, 1988).

⁹⁷ Sorkin, 121.

while being seated, and amusement parks worked the same way. While the parks seemed to be chaotic and noisy, visitors were mostly stationary while sitting and enjoying the rides or standing in line. Visitors got the feeling of exhilaration without using much energy or muscle strain. Also, the rides provided thrills and danger, while actually maintaining records of safety.⁹⁸ The 1920s also became the Golden Age of roller coasters, as visitors to parks wanted more thrilling rides. Roller coasters were built in large numbers during this time. In 1920, the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions was formed as a means of communication, exchange, safety, and self-protection for not only America's but the world's amusement parks.⁹⁹

While amusement parks remained popular the 1920s, the decade battered the amusement park industry. Many factors played into this decline: the automobile craze (which meant an end to the trolleys and trolley parks), the lack of space for automobile parking facilities at urban parks, the rise in extended independent leisure travel, Prohibition, a wide-ranging railroad strike in 1921, three successive years of bad summer weather, the selling of the parks by the transit companies to private individuals, and the Great Depression at the end of the decade.¹⁰⁰ The next three decades saw the decline of amusement parks across the country. The newest source of entertainment became the television. Also during this time, the affluent urban population moved away from urban areas (which was where the amusement parks were) and out to the suburbs, followed by the masses of war vets after World War II. They were replaced by a poorer population who did not have the same discretionary income as the previous urban dwellers, so they didn't frequent the parks. The 1950s and '60s were tainted by urban decay, crime, and

⁹⁸ Marling, 60-63.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 119-120.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 66.

desegregation, which affected how and where people spent their free time and, as a result, many crumbling amusement parks were demolished to make way for development.

As we will discuss in later chapters, most Wild West theme parks don't exist anymore. Many factors played a role in their demise, and their stories are much like those of amusement parks. So that we can fully analyze Wild West theme parks later, let's take a look at some amusement parks that survived and some that didn't, and what particular reasons led to their fates. Olympic Park in Irvington, New Jersey and Riverview Park in Chicago did not make it, but Kennywood in McKeesport, Pennsylvania and Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio succeeded and are still open today.

Olympic Park began as a picnic grove in 1887, then known as Becker's Grove. John Becker, a prominent citizen of German decent, originally bought the land because it was located about half a mile from the horse-car line. In its early years, the park had a bowling alley, dancing pavilion, rifle range, and ballpark. Many of the local citizens were outraged at the public intoxication and amount of beer that flowed at the park, which only led to the park being leased by a Springfield, New Jersey brewer named Frank Buehler in 1897. By this time, the trolley delivered visitors to the front gate for a nickel, so Buehler added electric lights and a very large, high-class restaurant to attract more visitors. He also focused on concerts and open-air dancing, but he did not add mechanical rides of any type. Steep competition from the numerous other amusement parks that contained rides, Wild West shows, and other grand types of amusements caused Buehler to sell the business to two gentlemen, Christian Kurz and Herman Schmidt. After the two men had seen the success of the midway at the World's Columbian Exposition, they immediately added one, as well as mechanical rides, a

circus, intricate landscaping, thousands of incandescent lamps, a ballroom, a 2,500-seat theater, a fireworks display each night, and a miniature railroad that transported visitors around the park. They reopened the park in 1904 with the new name Olympic Park after the Olympic Games that were held in St. Louis that year. Kurz and Schmidt wanted the park to remain a tranquil, family-friendly place for people to enjoy their leisure time. They constantly renovated the park and kept it spotlessly clean. They required visiting men to wear a coat and tie and children to wear their Sunday best. Gambling not allowed, and rowdiness in any capacity was not permitted. The park remained a popular upper-crust escape until 1914 when a fire burned down much of the park and Schmidt suffered a stroke that left him without his speech. The following year, Home Brewing Company acquired the park and principle stockholder Henry Guenther was charged with the management of the park. Guenther enjoyed running the park so much that he purchased it from the company in 1919, four months before Prohibition. By 1921, he had transformed the idyllic park into a chaotic fun land, much like that of Coney Island. However, unlike Coney Island, Olympic Park remained dry even after Prohibition.¹⁰¹

During the Great Depression, Guenther fought dwindling attendance with dance marathons, which drew impressive numbers of people willing to pay the steep entrance fee just to see the exhausted and physically injured dancers as they danced nonstop for five months straight. World War II brought more spending money for Americans, but left the park unable to make repairs on rides due to the lack of needed supplies and tools. The Guenther family combated this problem by maintaining what they could, applying fresh coats of paint each year, expanding the picnic grove (which had gained popularity as visitors were in need of a quiet, peaceful place to relax away from the trials of war),

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 68-71.

admitting servicemen free of charge, and by enlarging the parking lot. The park also offered plenty of free shows. Standards of conduct were strictly maintained at the park, as men were still required to wear ties, and girls over the age of fifteen were not allowed to wear shorts.¹

The park began to suffer in the early 1950s when the state enforced antigambling laws. This meant the removal of Olympic Park's pinball machines and other games of chance, which accounted for about forty-percent of the park's revenues. Also, television threatened Olympic Park's importance as a source of entertainment. Guenther attempted to join the television craze in 1952 by installing several large screen TVs throughout the park that ran all day and night, but it proved unpopular as visitors could see the same thing from the comfort of their homes. Guenther removed the TVs in 1953.²

The park saw many changes in the mid-1950s. The civil rights movement led to the inclusion of blacks at the park, the Guenther family had to keep up-to-date with social mores and loosen up on the dress and conduct codes, and the family became more lax on their upkeep of the park. Still, a new breed of suburban teenagers, proud possessors of cars, found more exciting things to do than visit amusement parks.³

Olympic Park, which was now considered an urban amusement park instead of a trolley park on the outskirts of town, saw its final days in May of 1965 when approximately five-hundred Newark youths rioted in the park, tearing up amusement equipment and stealing prizes and merchandise. They continued their vandalizing rampage outside the gates and into neighboring residential areas. These urban gangs frequented the park for the rest of the season, scaring off other Olympic Park patrons. At

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

the same time, development was slowly swallowing the land around the park and making property values too high to resist selling. Finally, the Guenthers sold the land to developers.⁴

Riverview Park in Chicago, Illinois was first opened by the Schmidt family in 1904 as a German Sharpshooter Park. In 1906, the owners commissioned the construction of a merry-go-round to entertain the wives and children of the men who were shooting. Soon after, George Schmidt returned from his travels abroad in a frenzy of enthusiasm over the amusement parks he had visited. He immediately expanded the amusement area, and by the 1920s the park was known as “the world’s largest amusement park,” served by four city streetcar lines. Riverview had as many as eleven roller coasters at one time. Other rides flanked the massive coasters, which provided thrills for every type of visitor.

Riverview remained popular until the 1960s. At that time, the urban park fell victim to racial and gang conflicts that often led to vandalism and robbery. Gang members who frequented the place regularly smashed penny arcade machines to collect the change, stole prizes and merchandise, and tore up rides and concessions just for entertainment. These events kept other Chicagoans away, and ticket sales plummeted. At the same time, new development around the park made Riverview prime real estate. In October of 1967, Riverview was sold to developers for \$6.5 million.⁵

Many other parks suffered similar fates. In 1850, Cincinnati’s Coney Island began as a picnic area known as Parker’s Grove on the banks of the Ohio River. As New York’s Coney Island gained notoriety, Parker’s Grove opened as an amusement park in

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid., 71-73.

1886. The Coney Island of the West remained successful because of its location on the river, which provided easy accessibility for large numbers of people, while the constant flooding caused owners to frequently rebuild, and rebuild better. However, the flooding also caused the demise of the park. The river location gave little room for expansion, and the threat of floods finally became too much of a risk. The park closed in 1971.

Palisades Park in Fort Lee, New Jersey was located on the Hudson River across from midtown Manhattan. It began as a trolley park and had a similar history to that of New York's Coney Island, but it didn't have the beach and it retained its modest size. Its cleanliness and close proximity to Manhattan kept visitors coming back. However, by the 1960s, property values were so high that the park could not afford to keep running in its location. It closed in 1971 and was torn down for high-rise apartments.⁶

On the other hand, Kennywood in McKeesport, Pennsylvania is one of the few American amusement parks that survived the trials of the mid-twentieth century and still exists today. In 1898, the Monongahela Street Railway Company leased from the Kenny family a picnic grove located twelve miles from Pittsburgh. The land had been a popular picnic location since the 1860s, but the railway company wanted to transform it into a trolley park. They designed the park, now calling it Kennywood, with well-constructed buildings, a man-made lake, walking bridges, a dance pavilion, merry-go-round, casino, all surrounded by lush, well-manicured landscaping. The trolley ride to the park even proved to be an exciting element of the whole experience, as riders traveled by day through steel mill areas along cliffs overlooking the Monongahela River Valley and witnessed the industrial lights of the mills on their return rides in the evening. Since the

⁶ Gary Kyriazi, *The Great American Amusement Parks: A Pictorial History* (Seacaucus, NJ: Citadel Press, 1976), 108-117.

street railway paid a flat fee for all electricity used, the company covered Kennywood in thousands of incandescent bulbs. During the first couple of years of the twentieth century, a band shell was constructed as well as Kennywood's first roller coaster. Soon after, rowboats, tennis courts, a dining hall, a shooting gallery, Ferris wheel, bowling alley, and a toboggan ride were added to the list of amusements.⁷

As changes came to the street-railway companies, many of them merged or changed hands. Many of these new owners didn't want to be in the amusement business and were ready to rid themselves of the parks. In 1906, Kennywood was leased to Andrew McSwigan, Frederick Henninger, and A. F. Meghan, who brought in exciting amusement rides, but continued to keep the unsavory Coney Island reputation at bay. They made sure that their original picnicking clientele still had an idyllic place to relax, and they kept the park clean and enforced a dress and conduct code. In the 1920s, during the heyday of roller coasters, Kennywood constructed many large coasters. They continued to maintain the coasters, as well as build new ones, and eventually the park became known as the "Roller Coaster Capital of the World."⁸

During the Great Depression, Kennywood remained relatively stable. Though business dropped by sixty-three percent, upkeep, maintenance, and entertainment continued, which kept the loyal visitors coming back. In 1947, a "kiddieland" was added in response to the baby boom. In the 1950s, the television and automobile challenged the importance of Kennywood as a source of amusement. In response, the park ran advertisements on every station and programmed appearances at the park by TV's most popular stars. At the same time, the popularity of the automobile coincided with the

⁷ Judith Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 73-78.

⁸ Ibid.

elimination of the railway line from Pittsburgh to Kennywood in 1958. The parking lot was expanded and the boulevard leading to the park widened, which accommodated automobile travelers. Kennywood was located far enough outside Pittsburgh that after cars became the only way to access the park, inner-city gangs had no means to get to the park, which allowed Kennywood to maintain the peaceful, clean, and safe family atmosphere that so many urban parks were losing.⁹

Generations of the Henninger family continued to manage the park. They added new thrill rides and coasters, and even ran a cruise service in the 1960s from Pittsburgh to Kennywood by way of the Monongahela River. During the 1970s and '80s, Kennywood expanded greatly with the construction of new thrill rides that utilized popular themes of the time, such as space travel.¹⁰

Kennywood has remained successful due to two things: its location and a dedicated management that keeps the park maintained and readily invests money back into the park, ensuring that it adapts to changing tastes. It is far enough from Pittsburgh that gang activity has not been a problem, but close enough to draw a large attendance. Also, its suburban location allowed for parking lot expansion as needed, alone with plenty of land on which to build large rides while maintaining the serene picnic areas. Also, the park was far enough out that it was never threatened by urban development expansion.¹¹

Another successful park is Cedar Point in Sandusky, Ohio, which began as a summer resort in 1870 when Louis Zistel, a German immigrant cabinetmaker, opened a beer garden, dance floor, and bathhouse. It was not located near a city like most parks

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

were at the time, but instead sat sixty miles west of Cleveland and sixty miles east of Toledo, and within a day's distance by railroad or steamship of Detroit, Akron, and Pittsburgh. In 1897, George Boeckling bought the resort and immediately began transforming Cedar Point into a high-class resort, but with all the thrills and chaos of Coney Island. He built the beautiful and sophisticated Hotel Breakers with six-hundred rooms and a grand lobby that contained chandeliers and stained-glass windows designed by the Louis C. Tiffany studios. Located beside the Hotel Breakers was the raucous amusement park and midway that contained freak shows, vaudeville acts, lavish lights, and bizarre architecture and ornamentation. The park even featured public spectacles of aviation by Glenn "The Birdman" Curtiss, whose 1910 flight from Euclid Beach Park in Cleveland to Cedar Point (a distance of sixty-four miles) beat the existing distance record by forty miles. Amidst all of the craziness of the park, there were also restful areas with shady trees, soothing fountains, sculptures, and performances by opera singers and other refined artists.¹²

Visitors traveled to the park by steamship and railroad, and eventually by automobile in 1914 when Boeckling built a concrete highway to the park. In 1918, Cedar Point got its very first scenic railway, which was the same thing as a tame roller coaster. Cedar Point's profits continued to climb steadily on into the 1920s, and in 1929 the park opened a new roller coaster that was built for speed. However, the 1930s began a time of decline for Cedar Point. Boeckling died in 1931, just as the Great Depression took hold. Boeckling's family took over the park, but was unwilling to invest in the park's maintenance and upkeep as he had. Attendance dropped as paint began to peel, weeds sprouted throughout the park, trash mounted, and rides became inoperable. The Hotel

¹² Ibid., 78-83.

Breakers became outdated as new motels offered air conditioning, private bathrooms, and television to guests. Furthermore, rumors of a polio epidemic in the early 1950s kept visitors away. However, Cedar Point's location far from any city meant that it faced neither inner-city violence nor development pressures.¹³

In the early '50s, George Roose, an attorney and investment banker from Toledo, Ohio, picked Cedar Point as the perfect location for an exclusive residential marina development. The Ohio State Legislature shot down his plans by ordering that the area remain a public recreation resort. Roose, along with business partner Emile Legros, went ahead and purchased the resort and in 1957 announced plans to not only preserve the park but to develop it into the "Disneyland of the Midwest." Roose brought in Marco Engineering, whose president was the former general manager of Disneyland, to map out a five-year plan for Cedar Point. Roose and Legros followed many of Disneyland's basic rules: maintain extreme cleanliness, offer family appeal, employ clean-cut workers, offer helpful guest services, and invest in widespread advertising. Roose and Legros continued to invest in the park every year, but were careful to preserve the existing fabric and the nostalgic feel. Cedar Point prospered more and more every year with new roller coasters, restaurants, shops, and a Frontier Trail theme area that opened in 1971. Even as new leader Robert Munger, Jr. took over in 1975, the tradition continued with annual reinvestment and up-keep, and as a result Cedar Point remained steadily on the top-ten list of most attended theme parks in the country. The tasteless freak shows and chaos are gone, but modern amusement rides merge with traditional elements to create a thrilling yet nostalgic experience for visitors.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

Today, periodic fairs, pleasure gardens, and world's fairs are remnants of the past. As America continues to become less and less of a rural society, the necessity for fairs diminishes. My hometown of Memphis, Tennessee, for example, cannot seem to keep its fair viable. The Mid-South Fair, which began in 1855, has been looking for a new permanent home since 2008 after failing to renew its lease with the Memphis fairgrounds, but due to money losses, politics, the decline of the areas surrounding the fairgrounds, and a general lack of interest, it seems as though it probably will not be around much longer. On the same note, the Michigan State Fair, one of the oldest in the country, ran its final season in 2009 after operating at a loss for several seasons. Pleasure gardens today do not exist in the same form as they once did. At their height, pleasure gardens existed as peaceful, intricately planned acreages of landscaping that included elements of entertainment, such as concerts, zoos, fireworks, and dances. They were places that visitors should see and be seen, and the gardens' high-class reputations were known worldwide. Pleasure gardens "invented the idea of simulated travel, initiating the great touristic dialect of appearance and reality."¹⁵ Their decline was in part due to the spread of the railway and other modes of transportation, which made actual exotic travel more feasible. Through the years, the gardens either closed down or added rides to keep visitors returning, and today do not exist in their purest form. There are gardens to visit for the sake of the landscaping, but they don't include the high-society reputation or the exciting daily orchestral or fireworks performances. Others, such as Prater or Tivoli Gardens, include gardens and performances, but exist more as amusement parks today with large rides to attract visitors. World's fairs continue today, but not with the same popularity they once had. The last American fair to occur was in 1984 in New Orleans,

¹⁵ Sorkin, 210.

Louisiana, which was so unsuccessful that the fair went bankrupt and eventually led to the United States' withdrawal of its membership to the Bureau International des Expositions, which governs over the bi- or tri- annual event. Elsewhere in the world, populations still attend the fairs with vigor, but the planners aren't without their share of challenges. To compete with today's technologies and constant distractions, organizers must come up with creative ways to bring the crowds. Where the fairs once provided a "must-see" international platform to learn different cultures, share technological advances, and discuss plans for the future, now the internet provides instant access to such information. Innovative thrill rides at world's fairs can no longer compete with those already existing in permanent amusement parks. Instead, fairs seek relevance through themes like ecology and energy.¹⁶

¹⁶ Daniel Michaels, "The U.S. Can't Host a World Expo, and Fans Say That's No Fair," *Wall Street Journal* (February 19, 2009), <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB123499805562316993.html> (accessed February 24, 2013).

CHAPTER 3

Frontier Town, North Hudson, New York

Walking the silent, overgrown streets of what used to be Frontier Town conjures haunting images of days gone by. Sounds of laughing children, pop guns, and western music can almost be heard echoing through the sixty-year-old trees, but one look at the decrepit buildings serves as a reminder that those sounds are long gone. At one time, the enterprise that was Frontier Town, located in North Hudson, New York, was home to cowboys and Indians, stagecoach rides, and shootouts. Billboards advertising the western town dotted Route 9 and Interstate-87 for miles, bringing travelers from northeast to spend a day in the wild, Wild West. The Frontier Town airstrip enabled travelers from all over the entire north and eastern seaboard to travel even longer distances to visit. Frontier Town's hotel and large cafeteria, as well as the motels and restaurants built by locals who wanted to capitalize on the tourist attraction, accommodated guests for extended periods of time. Today, Frontier Town is hidden away in the overgrown forest, only found by those who know what to look for or by unsuspecting hikers on one of the trails that unexpectedly meanders right through the middle of Frontier Town's Main Street. The cafeteria, gas station, air strip, restaurant/gift shop, and hotel still stand in plain sight along Route 9 and I-87, however anyone oblivious to the area's past would never guess that these buildings were once part of the Frontier Town complex. Once inside the theme park, it is easy to imagine what it must have been like. Everything is untouched except by time, which inevitably has aged the little town. The Main Street buildings, sagging and dreary, are slowly falling to pieces. A forest of saplings has taken over the rodeo ring. Cowboy boots and horseshoes litter the grounds throughout. Bright

green moss covers the damp, shaded log-constructed buildings in Pioneer Village, creating more of a fairyland atmosphere than a western one.



Figure 1. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, May 2011



Figure 2. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, 1957

North Hudson, New York is a small town located within the Adirondack Park, halfway between Lake George and Lake Placid, and eight miles from Schroon Lake. Today, the town consists of 183 square miles and, as of 2010, has a population of 276. It was settled in 1800 and established in 1848. Due to the rugged landscape, North Hudson was settled much later than other villages in the county. After it was settled, however, it grew quite rapidly. By 1811, North Hudson had its own gristmill and, around the same time, a major stage route¹⁷ was built through town, which connected Albany to Canada. During the mid-nineteenth century, New York produced more lumber than any other state, and most of that lumber came from the Adirondack area, which became known as the “Lumber Capital of the World.”¹⁸ Because of the presence of hemlock trees and water power from the Schroon River, early industry in North Hudson was also based in tanning. Hemlock bark was the preferred material in the Northeast’s tanning process due to the abundance of hemlock trees in the region and the high tannin content in the bark. Thus, the welfare of North Hudson settlers depended on the timber and tanning industries. Lumberjacks, both local and traveling, found it convenient to use the stage route to carry wood north and south, and North Hudson became a primary resting point along the way, creating a need for hotels and taverns. Locals opened up their homes as boarding houses, and entrepreneurs looking to take advantage of the situation built accommodations for the travelers.

Shortly after the Civil War, the tanning industry in North Hudson started to decline due to the high cost of traveling and the invention of the chemical tanning process, which made hemlocks unnecessary. It was at this time that North Hudson’s

¹⁷ This stage coach route appears to have been the foundation for what became Route 9.

¹⁸ “New Book Focuses on Adirondack’s Lumber Industry,” *North Country Gazette*, April 3, 2009.

industry moved toward the production of wood pulp, which still allowed the community to take advantage of the bountiful trees. Around the same time, the lumber industry in the area began to decline as an awareness of the negative effects of unsupervised and irresponsible logging began to bring about regulations on the lumber trade and ultimately led to the creation of the Adirondack Park in 1892 and a State Constitutional covenant in 1895, which kept the park “forever wild.”¹⁹ Then, the 1913 tariff reductions on Canadian pulpwood led to the collapse of the wood pulp industry, causing the Adirondack lumber industry to virtually cease. Because of the loss of the lumber industry, combined with the remote location and the lack of arable land (caused by deforestation), North Hudson’s population began to decrease. By the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, the area increasingly depended on the tourist trade connected to the Adirondack Park. As a result, the hotels and taverns that once catered to lumberjacks and traveling industrial men were used by tourists and vacationers. Tourism became important in the Adirondack region because Americans began to explore the hidden wonders of the deep, dark woods. Prior to the nineteenth century, the wilderness was viewed as a terrifying place. Though the Adirondacks were used as hunting grounds, they were not explored by many others due to the forbidding reputation. However, the writings of Thoreau, Emerson, and James Fenimore Cooper in the early to mid-nineteenth century helped change the image of the woods into a more positive one. In 1869, William H. H. Murray published a book called *Adventures in the Wilderness; Or Camp-Life in the Adirondacks*, which forever changed the fate of the Adirondacks. Tourists began visiting the area in increasing numbers, and entrepreneurs began building hotels, developing stage coach

¹⁹ New York State Adirondack Park Agency Website, http://apa.ny.gov/about_park/history.htm (accessed October 3, 2011).

lines, and connecting railroads to the region. By 1875, there were more than two-hundred hotels in the Adirondacks. At the same time, the Northeast's most wealthy began building luxurious camps in the area. Two vacation spots, Underwood and Elk Lake, were founded near North Hudson at the beginning of the twentieth century.

North Hudson had the good fortune of being located on New York's Route 9. The set of roads that would become Route 9 were given an unsigned legislative route designation in 1908, and became a signed route in 1924. From its inception, Route 9 was the main thoroughfare from Canada to Albany and on into New York City. Following the broad acceptance of the automobile in the 1920s, more and more people viewed cars as a means of entertainment, or at least a way to more easily travel to sources of entertainment, with numbers of drivers increasing from approximately 5 cars for every 1,000 Americans in 1910, to about 87 cars for every 1,000 Americans in 1920, to about 217 cars for every 1,000 Americans in 1930.²⁰ It was during this time that Route 9 became a popular thoroughfare for many city dwellers from New York who wanted to take advantage of their increased mobility by heading to the Adirondacks for recreation and relaxation, or to Canada to take advantage of the country's alcohol leniency during Prohibition. Motels, restaurants, and campgrounds popped up along the popular route to meet the needs of travelers. The Adirondack region continued to be a popular tourist attraction through the twentieth century, and local entrepreneurs took advantage of the large numbers of visitors that frequented the area by starting up their own tourist attractions. In the 1940s and '50s, a new form of recreation became popular in the Adirondack region in the guise of themed amusement parks. These new parks didn't

²⁰ Stacy C. Davis, Susan W. Diegel, and Robert G. Boundy, *Transportation Energy Data Book: Edition 30*, Office of Energy Efficiency and Renewable Energy, U.S. Department of Energy (Oak Ridge, TN: Oak Ridge National Laboratory, 2011), 3.5-3.9.

feature large, daring rides, but instead focused on a congruent theme throughout the park. The area became home to such places as the North Pole in Wilmington, NY, Old McDonald's Farm in Lake Placid, NY, the Land of Makebelieve in Upper Jay, NY, and Gaslight Village, Ghosttown, and Magic Forest in Lake George, NY. It is believed, in fact, that the theme park may have originated in the Adirondack area. As part of the chain of small theme parks and roadside attractions that drew visitors to the area, three popular tourist destinations were located in North Hudson on Route 9: Serpentarium, a drag-racing strip, and Frontier Town.²¹

Frontier Town was the creation of Arthur Bensen, who was born in 1913 and raised in New York City. As a young man, Bensen started a camera light company, which became economically self-sufficient. With the freedom his efficient business provided him, Bensen was a telephone installer on the side for twenty-one years before he decided to leave his job in 1951, sell the assets of the camera light company (which left him with \$40,000), and follow his dreams of opening a theme park.²²

After many months of searching, Arthur Bensen decided that an old farm property in North Hudson, New York would best fit his needs: the property contained one mile of frontage on the Schroon River with the Adirondack Mountains as a backdrop, and the property required no earth shaping before construction. In July of 1951, Bensen purchased the one-hundred-acre Wathsock Farm for \$1,800 and immediately set to work. At the time, North Hudson had a voting population of one-hundred, and it was only three years earlier in 1948 that the town had received connection to a power line.²³ Because of

²¹ <http://www.adkhistorycenter.org/esco/tow/northhudson.html>, accessed May 5, 2011.

²² Arthur L. Bensen, *The Story of a New York City Tenderfoot and His Adirondack Mountain Adventure* (North Hudson, NY: Frontier Town Productions, 1979), 6.

²³ *Ibid.*, 20.

the relative isolation, locals were eager for jobs. Bensen hired all of the local help he possibly could, including lumberjacks who helped with the log construction of the pioneer town. Bensen and his crew cut the necessary trees down with double-bladed axes, constructed the cabins by hand, and on July 4, 1952, Frontier Town opened to the public. Though he was unable to advertise his new park due to a lack of funding, 40,000 visitors came to Frontier Town in the first season.²⁴ At this point, Frontier Town consisted only of Pioneer Village, an encirclement of twelve log buildings with uses that would have been present in a western village: school, church, stage line depot, and many others. These original log buildings still stand sturdy today.



Figure 3. Frontier Town, Log Chapel, May 2011



Figure 4. Frontier Town, Log Chapel, Date Unknown

²⁴ Ibid., 55.



Figure 5. Frontier Town, Pioneer Village, May 2011



Figure 6. Frontier Town, Pioneer Village, Date Unknown

After the first season, Bensen wanted to spend the time and money to advertise Frontier Town as much as possible. He sought the help of an advertising firm in New York City, but after realizing it would cost him \$40,000 a year for their help, he decided to take it on himself. He made ads that were printed in New York City newspapers, as

well as papers in Albany, Utica, Syracuse, Rochester, Buffalo, Montreal, and Ottawa.²⁵ For the next couple of seasons, large newspapers printed four-page stories on Frontier Town, including color photos, which was not common practice at the time. During Frontier Town's 1953 season, over 100,000 people visited the park. Also, according to Bensen, during the 1953 season a camera crew from Walt Disney Productions visited Frontier Town. Bensen, under the belief that Disney was simply going to use footage of Frontier Town in a new movie, gave the crew free reign of the grounds. However, two years later Bensen realized that they had filmed Frontier Town for inspiration in the development of Frontier Land in Disney's new theme park Disneyland,²⁶ which opened in Anaheim, California in 1955.



Figure 7. Frontier Town Train, Date Unknown

Due to the popularity of Frontier Town, expansions were necessary in order to accommodate and entertain all of the visitors. Because of the visitors' apparent love for

²⁵ Ibid., 56-57.

²⁶ Ibid., 57.

cowboys, at the end of the 1953 season Bensen built the first cowboy section, Prairie Junction, and then needed to expand it further the following season. After the 1955



Figure 8. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, May 2011



Figure 9. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, Date Unknown

season, Bensen built a railroad that took visitors from the parking lot through the park on a locomotive that he bought from a collector in Long Island. In 1956, Bensen built a rodeo in Frontier Town and brought in real cowboys and rodeo stars from all over the country to perform stunts.²⁷ When Interstate-87, also known as the Northway, was constructed in the 1960s, Bensen took advantage of the situation and changed the entrance of the park to be closer to the Northway exit rather than on Route 9. Near the exit, he constructed a gas station and an A-frame building that housed a restaurant and gift shop. Bensen also continued to purchase stagecoaches and, as of 1979, Frontier Town ran the largest fleet of stagecoaches in existence. After the next couple of seasons, Bensen built an air strip, which became quite a popular landing strip for visitors to the area. Bensen learned to fly planes, which helped him in numerous ways. He was able not only to get places quickly and to advertise in the summer with flying banners, but also to take aerial photographs of Frontier Town to use in his advertisements. Bensen was also called upon numerous times by the State Conservation Department to search for lost hikers, hunters, and campers.²⁸

Ever since Bensen purchased the property, he had heard stories of a village that once existed on the land, particularly from his elderly next-door neighbor Frank Palmer who was born in and had never left his home. The only evidence of this village was the old bloomery forge that sat decaying on the property and one of the old company houses, in which Mr. Palmer lived. After researching and consulting historians, he discovered that the bloomery forge, which was the earliest method used in the iron and steel industry (predating the bloomery *furnace*), had been part of Roth's Forge Village that was located

²⁷ Ibid., 61.

²⁸ Ibid., 68.

on the very land that Frontier Town sat. Roth's Forge was opened in 1857 for the purpose of supplying wrought iron to the Union were there to be a war, which was already on the horizon. When the Civil War did occur, the forge supplied iron to the Union Warship "Monitor." In its heyday, the village consisted of the forge, charcoal

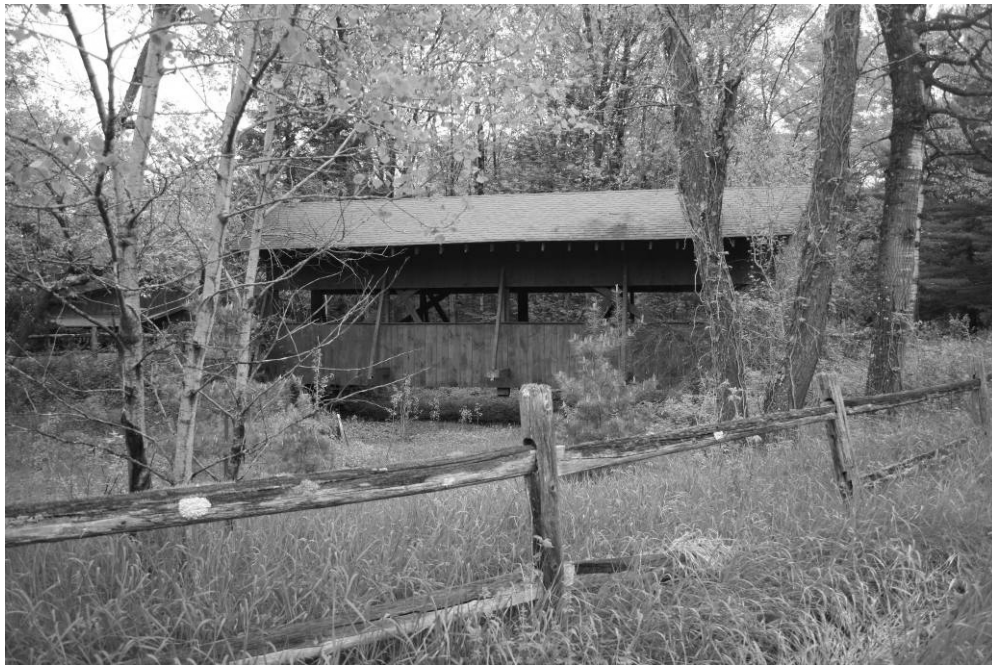


Figure 10. Frontier Town, Covered Bridge, Frontiers of Industry, May 2011

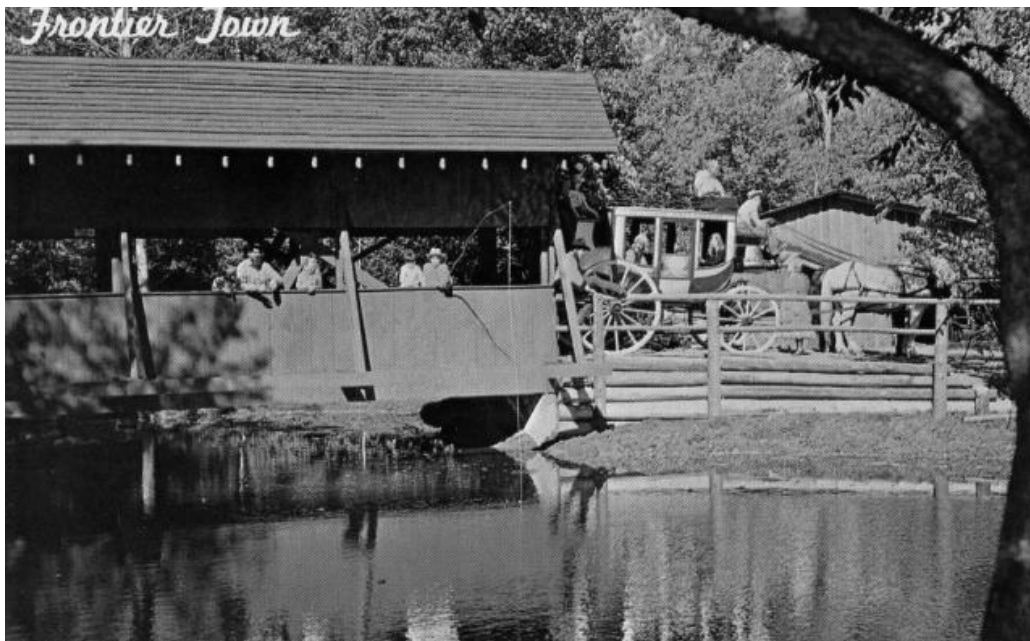


Figure 11. Frontier Town, Covered Bridge, Frontiers of Industry, Date Unknown

kilns, the ore separator, a blacksmith shop, a saw mill, grist mill, company houses, a boarding house, a general store, and a wheelwright shop. It closed in 1883. After learning this history, Bensen wanted to recreate the village. He restored the old bloomery forge and, in the 1970s, expanded the park to include the Frontiers of Industry section. He brought in a historic covered bridge, an 1870s saw mill, an ice house, and a water-powered eighteenth-century grist mill. When the Frontiers of Industry section opened, Bensen operated the machines as they would have been operated in their day, even producing iron in the old bloomery forge. At the time, historian Earl J. Heydinger of the National Historic Site Hopewell Village in Pennsylvania, who had spent years researching bloomery forges and furnaces, stated that the “Roth’s Forge is the only operating bloomery forge on the North American continent, nor are there any non-operating bloomery forges in existence that I am aware of.”²⁹

As mentioned earlier, Bensen was adamant about hiring locals to work in trades they had practiced before they retired. Many of the employees were true mountain people, skilled in cutting pulp wood for paper mills or logs for sawmills. Bensen not only utilized their skills in the upkeep of Frontier Town, but he also created spaces in the park where his employees could display their skills. This included skills such as spinning, weaving, pottery making, glass blowing, making maple syrup, and even ice harvesting.³⁰ Bensen also hired Native American Swift Eagle to teach visitors authentic Native American dances. He hired people of all ages, everyone from high-school kids to ‘old-timers’ as Bensen called them. At its zenith, Frontier Town had over three-hundred

²⁹ Ibid., 119, 113-122.

³⁰ Ibid., 113.

employees. Many of them were housed in the old Provancha Hotel on Route 9, which had been closed for years but reopened just to house the employees.

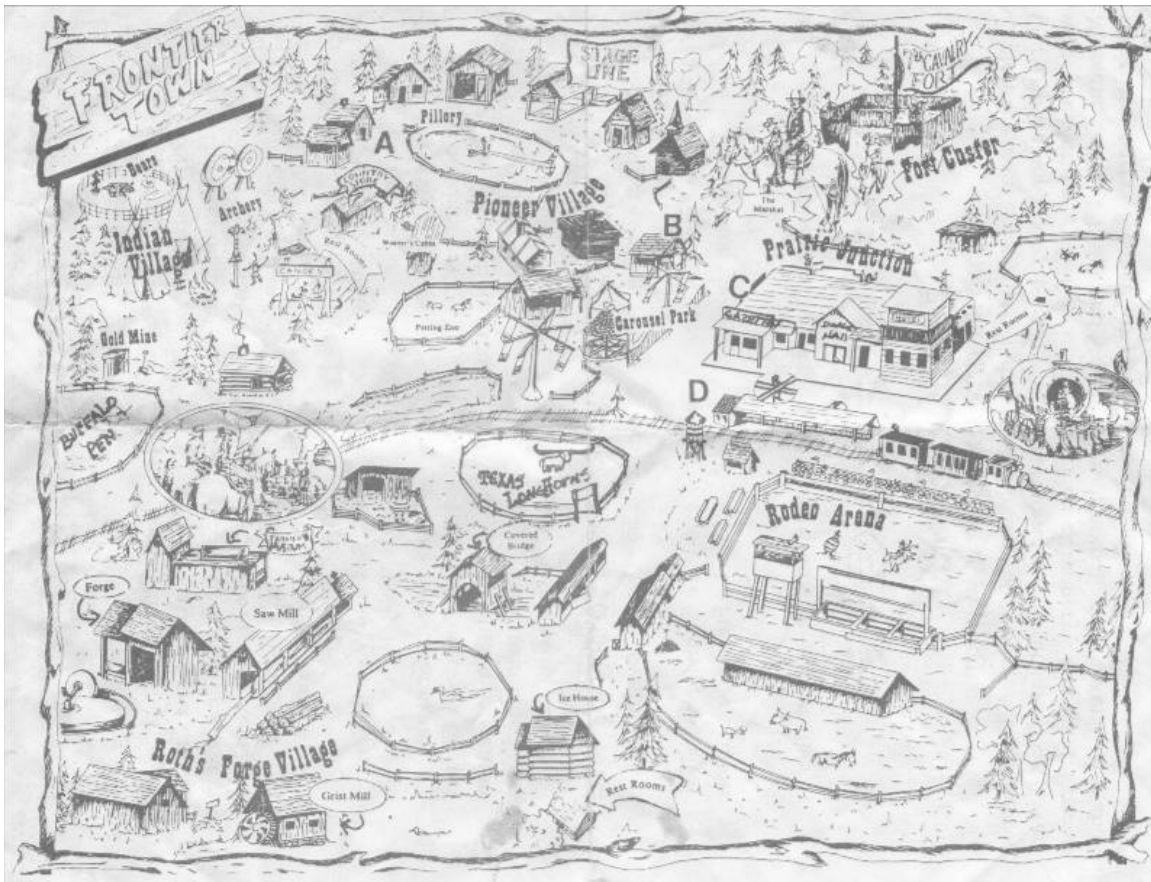


Figure 12. Frontier Town, Map of Frontier Town, Date Unknown

When Frontier Town finally came to its full fruition in the late 1970s, there were six areas of entertainment within the park: Prairie Junction, Fort Custer, Pioneer Village, Indian Village, Roth's Forge Village (or Frontiers of Industry), and the Rodeo Arena. Visitors entered the park from the parking lot on a train that dropped them off at a train station in Prairie Junction. Prairie Junction was a recreation of an old western downtown, complete with plank sidewalks and swinging doors. Prairie Junction contained the Last Chance Saloon where guests could get refreshments, the barber shop where visiting children could get a "shave," the Frontier Town Jail which included a jail cell window perfect for photo opportunities, a dance hall, a saddle shop, a silversmith, a Wells Fargo,

the Gazette office, and a handful of other shops authentic to Wild West times. There was even a water tower. Within Prairie Junction was Carousel Park, which contained a petting zoo, gazebo, the entrance for the trail ride, and various horse-powered rides perfect for younger children.



Figure 13. Frontier Town, Jail Cell Window Photo-Op, May 2011

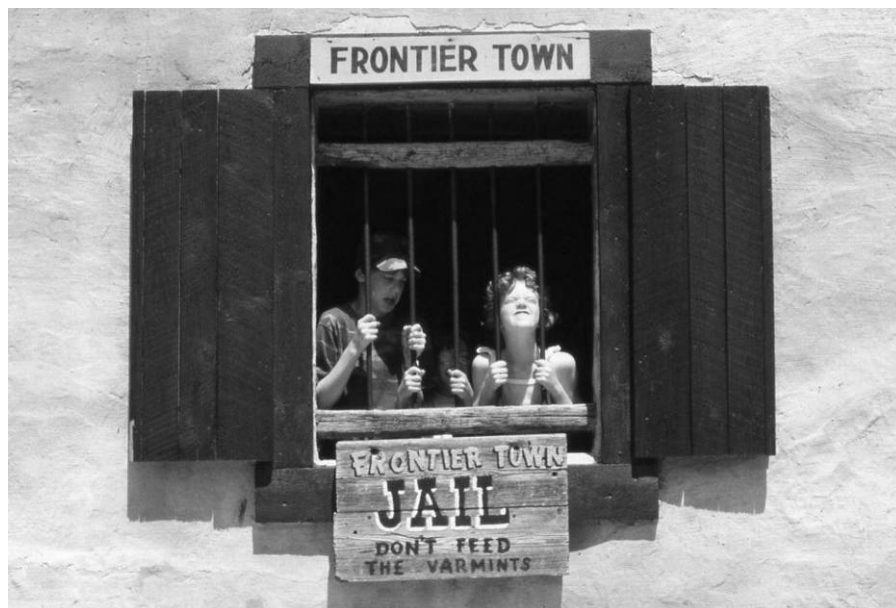


Figure 14. Frontier Town, Jail Cell Window Photo-Op, 1985

Moving on from Prairie Junction, visitors could climb the hill to Fort Custer where reenactments were performed and stories were told of what days were like inside a fort. Since the fort was located on a hill, it had fantastic views of Frontier Town.

Heading down the hill from Fort Custer, visitors next arrived at Pioneer Village. Within Pioneer Village were various log-constructed buildings including the blockhouse, church, schoolhouse, country store, the stage-line depot, a refreshment stand, and a handful of other buildings. In the center of Pioneer Village was the pillory, where guests could pose for pictures, and a pond that contained a wooden dunking apparatus where the Wild West “bad guys” were punished during reenactments.



Figure 15. Frontier Town, In front of Fort Custer, 1979

Next to Pioneer Village was the Indian Village, which included teepees, an archery area, a bear pen, a buffalo pen, a canoe ride, and a gold mine where visitors could pan for gold. Swift Eagle and his tribe performed of Native American dances, showcased their archery skills, and told stories of their people.

From Indian Village, visitors could travel on to Roth’s Forge Village, also known as Frontiers of Industry. Within this area was a Texas Longhorn pen, a covered bridge, an ice house, an 1870s saw mill, an eighteenth-century water-powered grist mill, a tannery, and a restored bloomery forge. All of these were in operating condition, and

Bensen used this opportunity to show that people once survived not only in western areas of the country but also in the Adirondacks by using these machines. Local people were hired to operate the mills.

From Roth's Forge Village, guests moved on to the Rodeo Arena where they were entertained by nationally renowned rodeo stars and performers. Bull riding, rodeo tricks, and even contests for visiting children were part of the rodeo itinerary.

SCHEDULE OF EVENTS			
ENGLISH		FRENCH	
9:30	Opening	9:30	Ouverture
9:50	Pony Express	9:50	Le Courrier a Cheval
9:55	The Clanton Shoot-Out	9:55	Le Fussilade Clanton
10:05	Swear in Deputy	10:05	Assermente un Depute
10:20	Judge Roy Bean & Dalton Raid	10:20	Judge Roy Bean et Dalton Raid
10:55	Cavalry	10:55	Cavalerie
11:15	Indian Pow-Wow	11:15	Pow-Wow Indien
12:00	Rodeo	12:00	Rodeo
1:00	Speedy Gonzales	1:00	Speedy Gonzales
1:30	Pony Express	1:30	Le Courrier a Cheval
1:35	The Clanton Shoot-Out	1:35	Le Fussilade Clanton
1:45	Swear in Deputy	1:45	Assermente un Depute
2:00	Judge Roy Bean & Dalton Raid	2:00	Judge Roy Bean et Dalton Raid
2:35	Cavalry	2:35	Cavalerie
2:55	Indian Pow-Wow	2:55	Pow-Wow Indien
3:35	Rodeo	3:35	Rodeo
4:30	Pony Express	4:30	Le Courrier a Cheval
4:35	The Clanton Shoot-out	4:35	Le Fussilade Clanton

Times may vary. Program may vary according to weather.

PARK HISTORY

FRONTIER TOWN HISTORICAL EXHIBIT

Explore the many interesting exhibits located in the Roth's Forge Village section. Our Trip Hammer Forge (which made the armor plates for the famed Civil War ship 'The Monitor'), a 1700's Grist Mill, Ice House, Tannery Compound, Farmers Museum, Covered Bridge and Steam Powered Sawmill, are truly enjoyable and fascinating part of Frontier Town.

Figure 16. Itinerary of Events at Frontier Town, post 1972, Exact Date Unknown

Throughout the day in Frontier Town, there were shootouts, robberies, and the swearing-in of children as deputies for the day. Every visitor was given a schedule of events for the day, such as the one pictured below. Also, money was not used within the park, so visitors were given a wrist tag on which purchases were tallied and paid at the end of the visit.

Outside the park, Bensen updated the old farmhouse to serve as his home during the summers and built an A-frame cafeteria and gift shop, a restaurant, a motel, a gas station, an air strip, and a stage where country singers would perform (including Johnny Cash in 1983).

By the early 1980s, Arthur Bensen's health was failing and he was ready to retire (he subsequently died in 1988). In 1983, Frontier Town was purchased from Bensen before it was sold to a Long Island bank a year later. The bank ran it for two years, but this proved to be disastrous as the park closed temporarily in 1985 and was put on the market for \$1.6 million.³¹ At the time of the park's closing, North Hudson's population was 179. The park itself created more than 300 jobs, as well as a need for motels, campgrounds, and restaurants, which allowed local entrepreneurs to open such facilities. When the park closed, those 300 jobs ceased to exist, as well as the need for the motels, campgrounds, and restaurants, which caused a domino effect in North Hudson's job market. The county also lost a huge tax source. Eighteen employees kept the A-frame cafeteria and gas station open as a rest stop, but the Frontier Town motel and the gift shop continued to sit empty. Local officials promoted the sale of the park using a county economic development agency. They even traveled as far as Tennessee for promotional

³¹ Elizabeth Edwardsen, "North Hudson Looks Back with Envy at Frontier Town Days," *Albany Times Union*, November 29, 1987.

purposes and started a letter campaign to such amusement parks as Disney World, Busch Gardens, and Dollywood in hopes that someone in the amusement park industry would be interested in the park.³²

In August of 1988, Frontier Town's 8,033 acre plot of land was purchased by Panther Mountain Water Park, Inc. of Rivervale, New Jersey for \$1.3 million. Panther Mountain paid a \$100,000 deposit, but the contract was also contingent on whether or not the company could secure an \$800,000 mortgage commitment by December 1 of that year. Kenneth Delafrange, President of Panther Mountain, planned to open the park by the 1988-89 ski season and to keep it open year-round if financing went according to plan. It did not, however, and he ended up opening it in May of 1989 as a summer attraction.³³

Panther Mountain, Inc. had not originally planned to purchase Frontier Town. In 1986, the company was founded with the purpose of owning and operating amusement parks. In January of 1988, the company successfully completed a public stock offering that raised \$1 million. The company's original plan was to construct a visitor's center with a twelve-lane bowling alley, restaurant, and water slides on Panther Mountain in Chestertown, New York. However, the company cancelled its plans when it ran into tough resistance from the Adirondack Park Agency about developing the fourteen acres of land within the park. At this time, Panther Mountain Inc. discovered the defunct Frontier Town and decided to put its efforts into reviving the already existing amusement park.³⁴

³² Ibid.

³³ "New Jersey Company Plans to Buy Frontier Town," *Albany Times Union*, August 18, 1988.

³⁴ James Denn, "Investors Aiming for a Water Slide Park End Up in the Wild West," *Albany Times Union*, September 8, 1991.

By 1991, two years after Panther Mountain purchased Frontier Town, it seems the park was already struggling. The *Albany Times Union* reported in September of that year that Panther Mountain was only \$70,000 into a \$100,000 private stock offering to raise capital to continue operations at Frontier Town. Delafrange and marketing director Frank McGovern had to cut their \$50,000 salaries to \$26,000 each due to the weak financial condition of the company.³⁵ Also during the 1991 season, Panther Mountain tried a revenue-raising experiment for Frontier Town. During the park's 39-year history, it always closed around Labor Day. However, Delafrange and McGovern wanted to keep it open during the weekends in September and possibly into October. According to McGovern, ten weeks was not enough time to generate the revenue needed to keep Frontier Town open, so they hoped that by staying open longer, more visitors would come. An increase in revenue would allow them to exist independently through the winter until they reopened in the summer instead of having to borrow money. The company also hoped that the Adirondack Park Centennial in 1992 would boost business.³⁶ The Essex County Department of Tourism (ECDT) took the unusual initiative of splitting the cost of advertising the park's extended season. This action was done not only to make amends for a flyer they incorrectly printed that said the park would close on September 2nd, but also since the park was the county's main tourist attraction, and the ECDT cared very much about seeing its continued success.³⁷ For the first time in ten years, Panther Mountain reported in its 1991-92 annual report a profit of \$66,044 and revenues of \$1.3 million; however, this was only due to the fact the Panther Mountain sold land and equipment to McDonald's Corporation for \$470,442 to open a restaurant in

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ James Denn, "To Stay in the Black, Park Extends Season," *Albany Times Union*, September 8, 1991.

the old A-frame building. Attendance continued to decline through the 1990s, dropping from about 52,000 visitors in 1992 to 28,303 in 1995, according to the company's last annual report in 1995.³⁸

In December of 1995, Frontier Town's situation continued to worsen. Delafrange reported in the *Albany Times Union* that Panther Mountain lost \$336,167 on revenues of \$1.16 million. The losses were slightly higher and the revenues were slightly lower than the year before. Delafrange claimed that park attendance was down due to a summer of extreme heat, a poor exchange rate with the Canadian dollar, and a decrease in the state's "I Love New York" campaign. Delafrange said they were trying to diversify to make up for lost revenue with the park's short season. He also emphasized that the park underwent extensive renovations in hopes of attracting more visitors. The company was even trying to cut costs by shutting down the motel and restaurant during the off-season, as well as decreasing the gas station hours. Until the company could turn a profit though, they would have to continue borrowing money or seeking investors.³⁹

By January 1996, Panther Mountain had accumulated \$5.1 million in debt; liabilities were \$2.4 million greater than assets.⁴⁰ In April of that year, Panther Mountain's debts had led to lawsuits from several creditors. Delafrange had invested over \$900,000 of his own money into Panther Mountain in hopes of keeping it afloat.⁴¹

In 2001, Panther Mountain, Inc. even merged with another company, Triton Trading Corp. in hopes of revitalizing Frontier Town into a year-round attraction and to

³⁸ Kevin Harlin, "Headed to the Last Roundup? Unless a Hero Rides to the Rescue, the Wild West Theme Park Frontier Town Likely Will End Up on the Auction Block," *Albany Times Union*, August 17, 2003.

³⁹ David Orenstein, "Financial Woes Have owner of Frontier Town Fighting for Survival," *Albany Times Union*, December 30, 1995.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ David Orenstein, "Northern Theme Park Struggles to Stay Alive," *Albany Times Union*, April 5, 1996.

further develop the unused 300-plus acres. This did not save the park either, but Triton invested money in stabilizing some of the buildings and paid back some of the delinquent sales and property taxes. One might ask why anyone would invest in an operation that seems to be plagued with disaster? Fond memories of visiting the park as a child, “and we were sorry to see that it was closed down,” said Triton President Bob Lancellotti.⁴²

In July of 2003, the *Albany Times Union* reported that in order to avoid foreclosure, Delafrange was talking with investors to help cover \$304,188.41 in county property taxes stretching back to 1998. He also hoped to raise an additional \$400,000 to get the park open and running again.⁴³ His pleas were unsuccessful, however. In August of 2004, after Delafrange was unable to pay the delinquent property-tax bill of \$318,000, Frontier Town was seized by Essex County and the contents, land, and buildings were sold at auction in October. Frontier Town was sold in two parcels, with the sales making slightly less than the \$350,000 in back taxes, penalties, and interest accumulated since 1998.⁴⁴ Since then, nothing has been done with the land.

So how and why, after several decades of great success, did Frontier Town slowly meet its sad fate? Several reasons come into play in this situation. For one, the construction of the Adirondack Northway in the 1960s had a huge effect on travelers’ itinerary, and consequently on the little towns that are settled along Route 9. Before the Northway, a trip from Albany to the Canadian border required a trip up Route 9, which took four hours. As families made the trip, the travel time to and from was just long enough to require a stay at one of the family-owned motels or campgrounds along the way and several stops at local eateries. A journey up or down Route 9 was a vacation in

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Kevin Harlin, “Tax Foreclosure Threatens Idle Theme Park,” *Albany Times Union*, July 16, 2003.

⁴⁴ Kevin Harlin, “Frontier Town Sites Sold,” *Albany Times Union*, October 22, 2004.

itself, as themed motels generally had pools and activities for children and were situated near local attractions. Families made adjustments in trip schedules to allow time to enjoy the independently-owned attractions. When the Northway was completed, the eight-hour round-trip time was cut to four hours. With travel time cut in half, families couldn't help but take the interstate. Because the interstate route bypassed towns and shortened travel times, families no longer drove by local establishments and there was no longer a need to stay at motels and eat at local restaurants. Towns located along Route 9 slowly lost most of their business. Families were more concerned about arriving at the final destination in record time instead of enjoying the journey on the way to the final destination.

Interestingly enough, advocates for the Adirondack Park and business owners along Route 9 foresaw this becoming a problem before the interstate was even built. In fact, in 1961 when Arthur Bensen was serving as Chairman of the Adirondack Park Association Committee, he was quoted saying that "while the Adirondack Northway could be the greatest blessing ever to come to the North Country, it may prove just the opposite if tourists should get the impression that the main purpose of this super road is to speed them to the Canadian border in the shortest possible time with scarcely a glance at this, the most beautiful part of the State of New York."⁴⁵ Local people wanted to set up information centers along the Northway to "prevent economic disasters to those areas being bypassed by the Adirondack Northway."⁴⁶ They suggested that the rest areas be expanded into picnic spots for travelers with informational signs about nearby scenic areas, tourist attractions, and historic sites. Local citizens felt that they would be missing "a splendid opportunity to help the tourist really enjoy [his] time. [Also, they would] be

⁴⁵ "Adirondack Parks Committee Wins Support of Governor in Northway Plea," *Press-Republican*, March 27, 1961.

⁴⁶ "We must make it easy for the tourist," *Press-Republican*, April 23, 1966.

missing a bet in not making all this easily available at rest stops along the Northway. A traveler expects to have it easy today. If he doesn't find it that way, he'll just keep traveling and he won't come back." They also planned on making signs that advertised restaurants and motels that were now located off of the main roadway.⁴⁷ Frontier Town's location directly off the Northway helped the theme park survive for a little while, but the change in travel methods and the gradual decline of North Hudson and other towns along the way definitely had a hand in Frontier Town's demise.

Another reason for the failure of Frontier Town was competition. Attractions such as the Great Escape theme park, located farther south on the Northway in Queensbury, continued to evolve by adding bigger, taller and faster rides. Frontier Town was tied to its historical period, was limited by space and strict Adirondack Park building regulations, and lacked the residual funding required to reinvest and build big thrilling rides.

As technology has continued to expand, and the internet and gaming systems have become staples in the lives of children, shootouts between cowboys and Indians are no longer thrilling. Kids get excited about grand theft auto and battles in foreign lands with automatic weapons and explorations of fantasy worlds. It seems Frontier Town, as well as many other independently-owned parks in the Adirondack region, lost the attention of most children to 3-D television, the Internet, and home-gaming systems.⁴⁸

According to Laura Rice, a curator at the Adirondack Museum in Blue Mountain Lake, local attractions like Frontier Town, "are now recognized as integral to the

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Kevin Harlin, "Headed to the Last Roundup? Unless a Hero Rides to the Rescue, the Wild West Theme Park Frontier Town Likely Will End Up on the Auction Block," *Albany Times Union*, August 17, 2003.

development of the Adirondack Park as a resort area in the 1950s.”⁴⁹ Today, despite the derelict appearance of the little theme park, Frontier Town has quite a following. The internet has become a place where people can reminisce about the glory days of the park. In particular, *Steve Gross’s Frontier Town Website* has become a porthole to the past, as people have posted memories, photos, and videos of their days at Frontier Town. Many who visited the park during the summers equate Frontier Town with their childhood. Many feel that Frontier Town helped mold them into the people they are today. So many people continued to post and comment about Frontier Town on the internet that it became obvious that the little park is an important piece of American history, and in 2011 the first annual “Frontier Town Day” was organized by the Schroon-North Hudson Historical Society. It is a day when people gather to commemorate and reminisce about a place that so many people still hold dear. It’s humbling to see how so many generations of people were greatly impacted by a little man-made place like Frontier Town. When Art Bensen founded Frontier Town, he said he wanted to mix education with fun and, according to him, that was the difference between Frontier Town and other amusement parks. He claimed he was using the Sesame Street method before it ever appeared on television.⁵⁰ Even walking through the stacks of pine needles and overgrown grass that pokes through the boardwalks today, it is easy to see that Frontier Town was indeed different from other amusement parks and why so many people felt that this place was magical.

In the following pages, photos from Frontier Town’s heyday have been juxtaposed with photos that were taken of Frontier Town in May of 2011, and the

⁴⁹ Mirror Staff, “Lakes to Locks ‘Minute’ Looks at Story Town,” *Lake George Mirror*, February 20, 2011.

⁵⁰ Elizabeth Edwardsen, “North Hudson Looks Back with Envy at Frontier Town Days,” *Albany Times Union*, November 29, 1987.

contrast is startling. [Historic photos courtesy of Steve Gross's Frontier Town Website, www.frontiertown.net; present-day photos were taken by this author]



Figure 17. Frontier Town, Expanded Original Entrance, May 2011



Figure 18. Frontier Town, Benson family, Original Entrance, 1954



Figure 19. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, May 2011



Figure 20. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, 1979



Figure 21. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, May 2011



Figure 22. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, Date Unknown



Figure 23. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, May 2011



Figure 24. Frontier Town, Prairie Junction, Late 1950s



Figure 25. Frontier Town, Pioneer Village, May 2011. Notice Prairie Junction in the background.



Figure 26. Frontier Town, Pioneer Village, circa 1954.
Notice this photograph was taken before Prairie Junction was constructed.



Figure 27. Frontier Town, The Dunker, Pioneer Village, May 2011



Figure 28. Frontier Town, The Dunker, Pioneer Village, 1953



Figure 29. Frontier Town, Pioneer Village, May 2011



Figure 30. Frontier Town, Pioneer Village, 1950s



Figure 31. Frontier Town, The Dunker, Pioneer Village, May 2011



Figure 32. Frontier Town, The Dunker, Pioneer Village, 1954



Figure 33. Frontier Town, The Blockhouse, Pioneer Village, May 2011



Figure 34. Frontier Town, The Blockhouse, Pioneer Village, Postmarked August 1953



Figure 35. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, May 2011



Figure 36. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, 1992⁵¹

⁵¹ Courtesy of Linda Fountain Photography



Figure 37. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, May 2011



Figure 38. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, 1996-97



Figure 39. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, May 2011

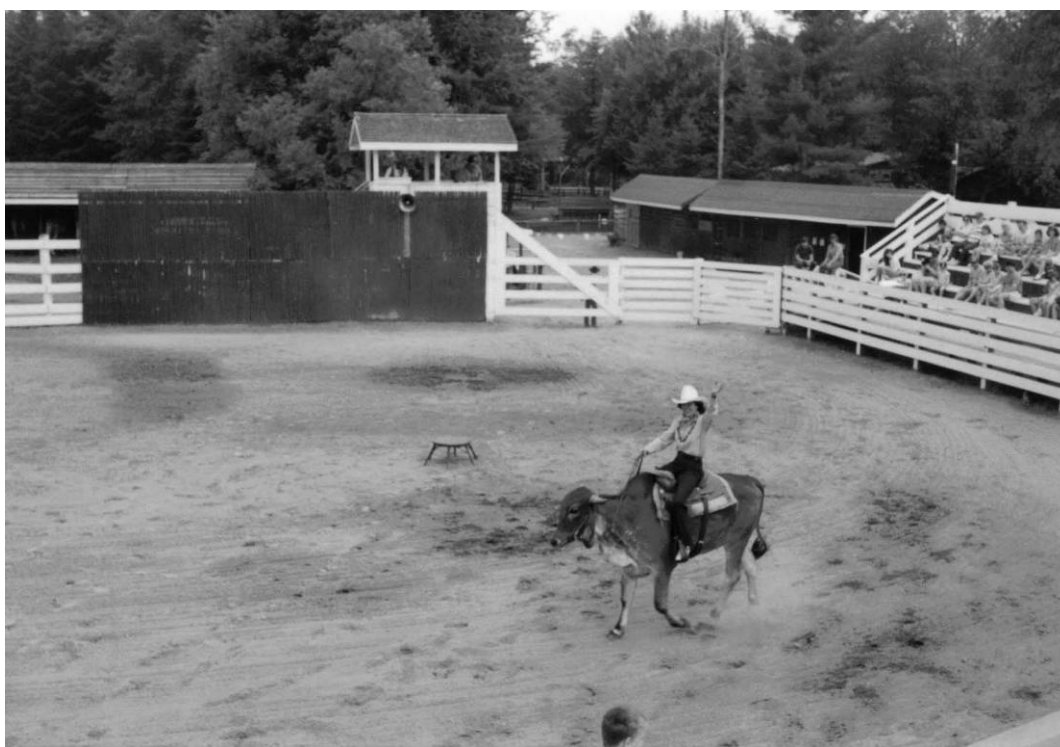


Figure 40. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, 1991



Figure 41. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, May 2011



Figure 42. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, 1991



Figure 43. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, May 2011



Figure 44. Frontier Town, The Rodeo Ring, 1993



Figure 45. Frontier Town, Cafeteria and Gift Shop, May 2011



Figure 46. Frontier Town, Cafeteria and Gift Shop, Date Unknown



Figure 47. Frontier Town Restaurant, 2011



Figure 48. Frontier Town Restaurant, 1966



Figure 49. Frontier Town, Parking Lot, 2011. Notice the Billboard.



Figure 50. Frontier Town, Parking Lot, 1966. Notice the Billboard.

CHAPTER 4

Frontier Village, San Jose, California

Every June since 2002, hundreds of people from all parts of the country have gathered in Edenvale Garden Park in San Jose, California to remember Frontier Village. Edenvale Garden Park was the site of the long-gone theme park, and it is here that former employees and visitors of Frontier Village make their yearly pilgrimage, stocked with old photos, souvenirs, and actual remnants of the park that they collected at the closing auction or in the decade since. Past employees come dressed in their old uniforms and many recreate the old stunts they performed in the shootout scenes. These reunions were originally prompted by the popularity of “Remembering Frontier Village,” a website that is devoted to preserving the memory of Frontier Village. The website, which started in September of 2000, is overseen by Kim Pederson, Mat Lindstedt, Elliott Fong, and Shaughnessy McGehee, four guys who made several trips to the theme park as children. They came together as amusement park/roller coast enthusiast commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the park’s closing, and decided it was imperative to launch a site in memory of the park. “Remember Frontier Town” has become a place for people to share oral recollections, photos, and memorabilia. Some of the people who have posted on the website only happened upon it while searching to see if Frontier Village is still around. Others who have posted have made the preservation of Frontier Village a lifelong commitment. Nostalgia is a powerful thing, and it is what has brought these people together. Shaughnessy McGehee, who says that he’s “always been kind of a nostalgic person,” has even built a scaled down model of Frontier Village in his backyard. He explains that “the family values of Frontier Village are harder to find in

modern corporate entertainment,” and he wanted his four kids to experience the place that he loved so much as a child.¹

San Jose was founded in 1777 as a farming community and remained agriculturally based until the U.S. War Department contracted Food Machinery Corporation (FMC) to build military equipment during World War II. After the war, FMC (known as BAE Systems today) continued as a defense contractor. In 1956, International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) opened its first West Coast research center in San Jose.² Both of these corporations, along with the aggressive agenda of political-machine city manager A. P. “Dutch” Hamann to expand the city during the 1950s and ’60s, propelled San Jose to become one of the fastest growing cities (both economically and population-wise) in America.³

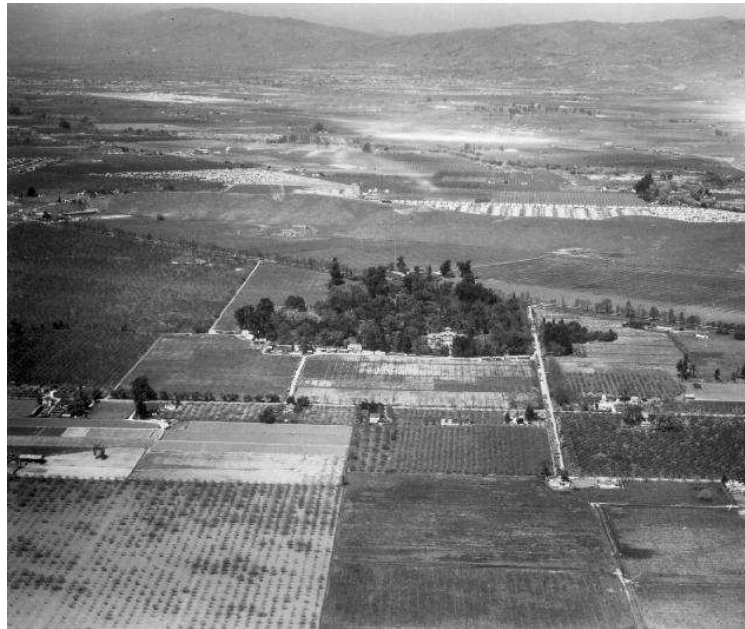


Figure 51. Taken in 1958-59 before the construction of Frontier Village. The forested area is what became Frontier Village. At the time this photo was taken, the Hayes Mansion sat vacant and deteriorating.

¹ Peter Hartlaub, “Frontier Village: Old West Park Preserved,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, August 24, 2010.

² “IBM Research,” <http://www.research.ibm.com/labs/almaden/> (accessed November 23, 2012).

³ “San Jose, CA” and “A.P. Hamann,” www.wikipedia.com (accessed November 23, 2012).

Frontier Village got its start in October of 1961 when San Jose was still a small, quiet community surrounded largely by farms and trees. Joe Zukin, who made his living running several service stations and car washes in San Jose, purchased 33 acres from the estate of Congressman Hayes, which included the 1899-vintage 64- room Hayes mansion, “Edenvale.” Zukin, who became inspired with the idea to build a western-themed park after attending the opening of Disneyland with his family in 1955, purchased the land and employed a fleet of salesmen to sell Frontier Village stock. After raising about \$500,000, Zukin hired Laurie Hollings to design the park.⁴ Hollings was a set designer, sculptor, painter, and amusement-ride designer, who had worked for Walt Disney, the western-movie division of Paramount and Columbia Studios, the California Academy of Sciences (designing nature habitats), and San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House (designing sets). His “forte was [creating] environments that delighted mothers and their children.”⁵ Because Frontier Village was to be an amusement park, Hollings created “a sort of tongue-in-cheek approach to the Wild West.”⁶ The town was built very much like a set; Hollings basically built boxes for the buildings but designed the exterior shell to fit the western motif. Unlike a movie set, visitors could enter the buildings and go inside the various shops and restaurants. Hollings illusionary techniques were actually not very different from the architecture of the original western villages, where “False Front” architecture was widely employed in western mining villages that sprang up virtually overnight during the silver and gold mining booms of the

⁴ Carlos Castillo, “Lost Frontier: Closed 24 years ago, a Silicon Valley amusement park now exists only in cyberspace,” *Preservation, preservationnation.com*, August 18, 2002, <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/story-of-the-week/2002/lost-frontier.html> (accessed January 13, 2012).

⁵ “Scenes from San Jose’s Frontier Village, 1961-1980,” *San Jose Mercury News*, May 24, 2012.

⁶ “‘Imagineering’ Frontier Village Let Kids’ Fantasies Run Wild,” *San Jose Mercury News*, March 17, 1988.



Figure 52. Frontier Village, Main Street and Railroad Station, Date Unknown.
Notice in the lower right side of this picture the rooftops of the Western Block.
The false front pieces can clearly be seen.

late nineteenth century. Builders became well-versed in creating the illusion that these buildings were not only bigger than they actually were, but also that they were constructed of something other than wood by using pressed metal, stucco, rolled asphalt siding, or by simply creating another illusion with wood.⁷ It was pertinent, after all, to create the image that your business and your town were thriving, and to do it in the cheapest way possible.⁸



Figure 53. Joe Zukin (left) and Laurie Hollings shortly after Frontier Village was completed

⁷ "False Front Commercial," Colorado Historical Society's Web Guide to Colorado's Historic Architecture and Engineering, <http://www.historycolorado.org/oahp/false-front-commercial> (accessed January 15, 2012).

⁸ Kingston Heath, "False-Front Architecture on Montana's Urban Frontier," In *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture III*, edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman, 199-213. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989.

The completed amusement park occupied ten acres, with an additional five used for parking and thirteen acres were set aside for future growth of the Village. Though the architecture was new, it seemed to have been there for years because the buildings were carefully sited around the hundreds of existing 75-year old trees that had been planted in 1887 when the Hayes family first bought the land. The shade contributed to the peaceful atmosphere that so many people remember today. Frontier Village was different than many western theme parks of the time in that it included rides from the day it opened on October 21, 1961, though they were mostly tame and entertaining as opposed to thrilling and scary. Most other western theme parks tried to stay as close as possible to the feel of an actual Western town, except in much later years when parks added rides in an attempt to keep up with the competition of new corporate amusement parks.

In 1961, visitors to the new Frontier Village entered through fortified gates to be greeted by the striking sight of the grand train depot and the lush landscaping of Central Square. At this time, only a handful of attractions were open, as many were still in the planning and construction stages. Visitors could hop aboard the Southern Pacific Railroad at the Frontier Village Railroad Station and take a ride around the entire park, try their hand at fishing in the trout pond (and actually take the fish home), ride through the Lost Frontier Mine, cross a suspension bridge to Indian Island where visitors could hone their archery skills, visit the trading post, see some teepees and Fort Far West, or catch a Native American dance show on the Indian Island Stage. Visitors could also ride the carousel, take a journey on a real burro pack ride, go on the horseless carriage ride, take a ride on a historic stagecoach, venture through Wild Country, catch a show at the



Figure 54. Map of Frontier Village, 1961

band stand or outdoor auditorium, or explore Pleasure Island. Main Street at this time included shops and restaurants such as the General Store, Silver Dollar Saloon, arcade, Marshal's Office, hat shop, the Last National Bank, blacksmith shop, antiques, Western Wear, glass shop, and even a Mexican Restaurant. The idea for Haunted House Island had been conceived and was in the planning stages.

The park was instantly popular. According to Zukin, it had an annual attendance rate of about 400,000, going as high as 485,000 during a peak year.⁹ Frontier Village was well-known in the region, even attracting celebrities. Bing Crosby had his son's third year birthday party there, and Nat King Cole was known to take his family there regularly.



Figure 55. Bing Crosby and his family at Frontier Village, 1964

From the beginning, an important part of visiting Frontier Village was watching the shoot-out shows. Frontier Village had what they called “Fall Guys” who came up with the stunts and storylines, which were based on scenes and action sequences that they had seen in films and television shows. “Digger the Undertaker” was usually involved in these skits, as well as the bartender and barmaids, the train engineer, and “Indian Jim.” They performed all over the park, including Main Street, around the rides, and even along the train route. Members of the audience were always called upon to participate in the action. Interestingly, the Fall Guys are still together today and perform regularly around California; they always plan something special for the annual reunion picnic. Another

⁹ *Cougars' Tales: Camden High School's Electronic Newspaper*, Issue Number 5, Late Spring 2000, <http://www.cougarstales.com/issue/5/>.

important part of the Frontier Village experience was meeting the marshal. Frontier Village had only one marshal at a time, and it was the only full-time salary position at the park besides the managers. The marshal's job was taken very seriously, and he became somewhat of an ambassador for the park. He was also very much involved in the Fall Guys' skits.

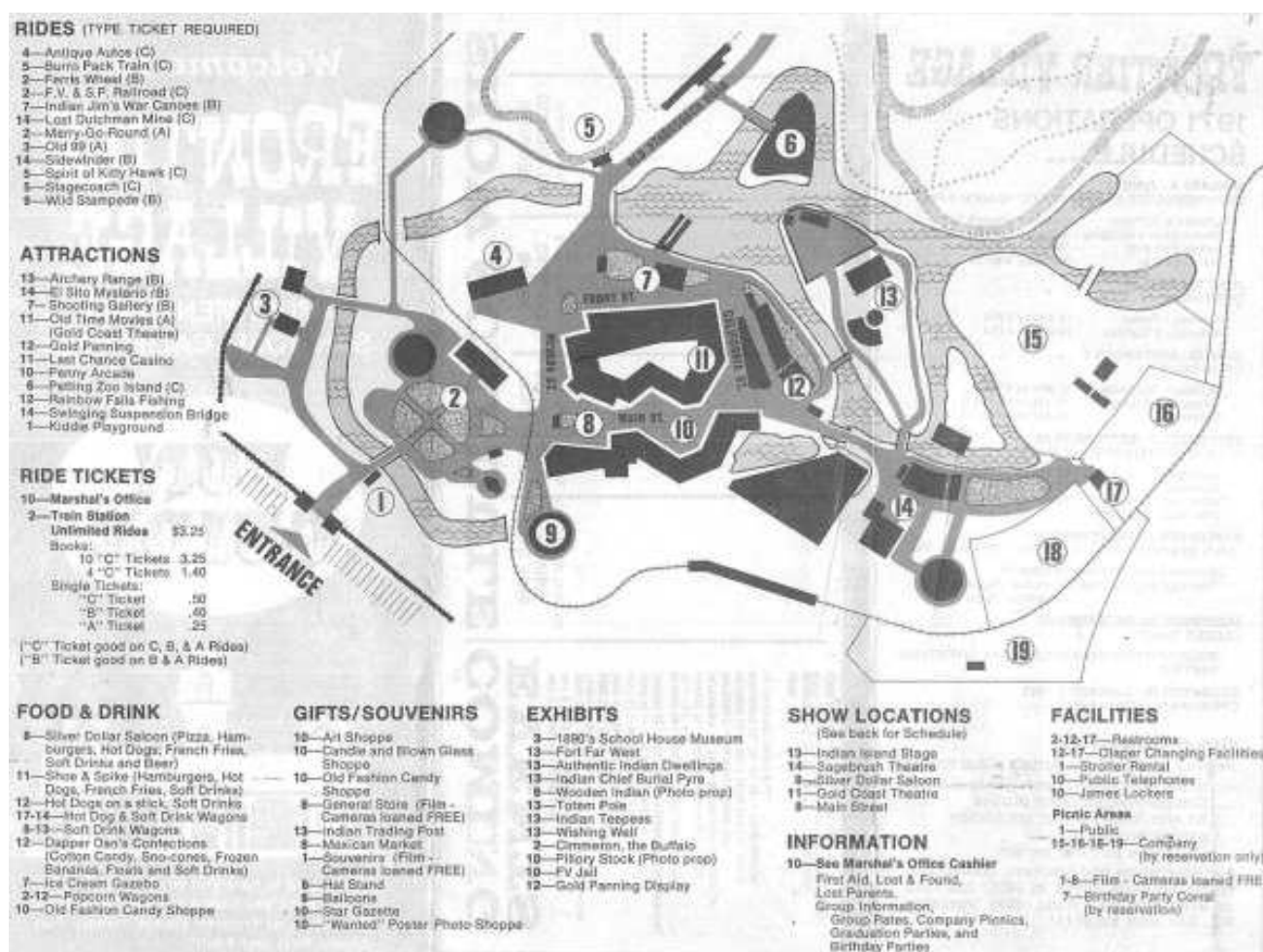


Figure 56. Map of Frontier Village, 1971

Frontier Village continued to evolve throughout the 1960s. Exhibits and shows were added, along with more shops and restaurants. Main Street was expanded to become the Old Western City Block, which was made up of four streets: California Street, Front Street, Nevada Street, and Main Street. Here, guests visited commercial

operations such as cafes, shooting galleries, game arcades, candy shops, picture shops, as well as more traditional western town sites, such as saloons, barber shops, a trading post, casino, shoe and spike shop, marshal's office, and bank. New rides were added and existing ones renamed. By 1971, new rides included Indian Jim's Canoes, the Ferris Wheel, Old 99 (a kiddie train ride), the Sidewinder (a Tilt-A-Whirl), the Spirit of Kitty Hawk (flying planes that went around in a circle), a Merry-Go-Round, and the Stampede (a scrambler ride). Other new attractions included the El Sito Mysterio where a seemingly gravity-challenged bowling ball rolled upward on a downhill curve, the Schoolhouse Wax Museum, Last Chance Casino, the Penny Arcade, Gold Panning, Kiddie Playground, Shooting Gallery, Sagebrush Theatre, and Gold Coast Theatre where old-time movies were shown. Renamed attractions included the Horseless Carriage ride, which became Antique Autos, the Lost Frontier Mine Ride which became Lost Dutchman Mine, and the trout pond which became known as Rainbow Falls Fishing. Many of the rides that were added to Frontier Village were specially made for the park; the ones that were not were painted and transformed to fit the western motif. There were large, shady picnic areas and venues for birthday parties, as well as areas for other activities such as volleyball and softball. What was originally planned to become Haunted House Island became Petting Zoo Island.

Because of Frontier Village's popularity, by 1973 Zukin was ready to expand the theme park as he had originally planned, but the 2,300 shareholders could not finance his vision. Instead, Zukin sold Frontier Village to Rio Grande Industries¹⁰ for \$1.7 million,

¹⁰ Formed in Denver in 1968, Rio Grande Industries was the diversified parent company of the Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad. Its non-railroad operations included construction, real estate, and energy units. It was later renamed Southern Pacific Rail Corporation.
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rio_Grande_Industries (accessed January 5, 2011).

but he continued to work closely with the new owners in the management of the park. With the help of Hollings, the new owners wanted to expand the original thirteen acres, to a total of sixty acres. Rio Grande also owned Arrow Development, which manufactured amusement park rides, so they planned on using Frontier Village as a showcase for their rides. However, since the opening of Frontier Village in 1961, the surrounding land had been subdivided and developed, and the families that lived in these new suburban neighborhoods protested against the expansion of the park. Though the San Jose planning commission granted them permission to expand, Rio Grande didn't feel that it was worth the trouble of dealing with lawsuits from disgruntled neighbors. They stayed within the existing fabric of Frontier Village.

Between 1971 and 1977, a few more rides were added: the Round-Up ride (a circular standup ride), as well as the Duster-Turnpike, which drew on the popularity of the Antique Auto ride. The Tarantula, built by the Eyerly Aircraft Company in Salem, Oregon for a little over \$41,000, opened in 1975. Apache Whirlwind, the last ride to be added, was constructed in 1976 for almost \$600,000. It was basically a kiddie roller coaster. After the addition of Apache Whirlwind, the park remained physically unchanged until its last season in 1980. One very important addition to the park in 1975 was not a ride but rather a music group, the Gaslight Gang. The group consisted of four members: Kevin McCabe (Plectrum Banjo), Scott Hartford (Tenor Banjo), Bruce Jolly (String Bass), and Debbie Hartford-Weitzel (Piano). They played daily at the Silver Dollar Saloon, but also roamed around the park playing and took the place of any canceled music acts scheduled to play on the Sagebrush Theater stage. They were Frontier Village staples until the park's closing.

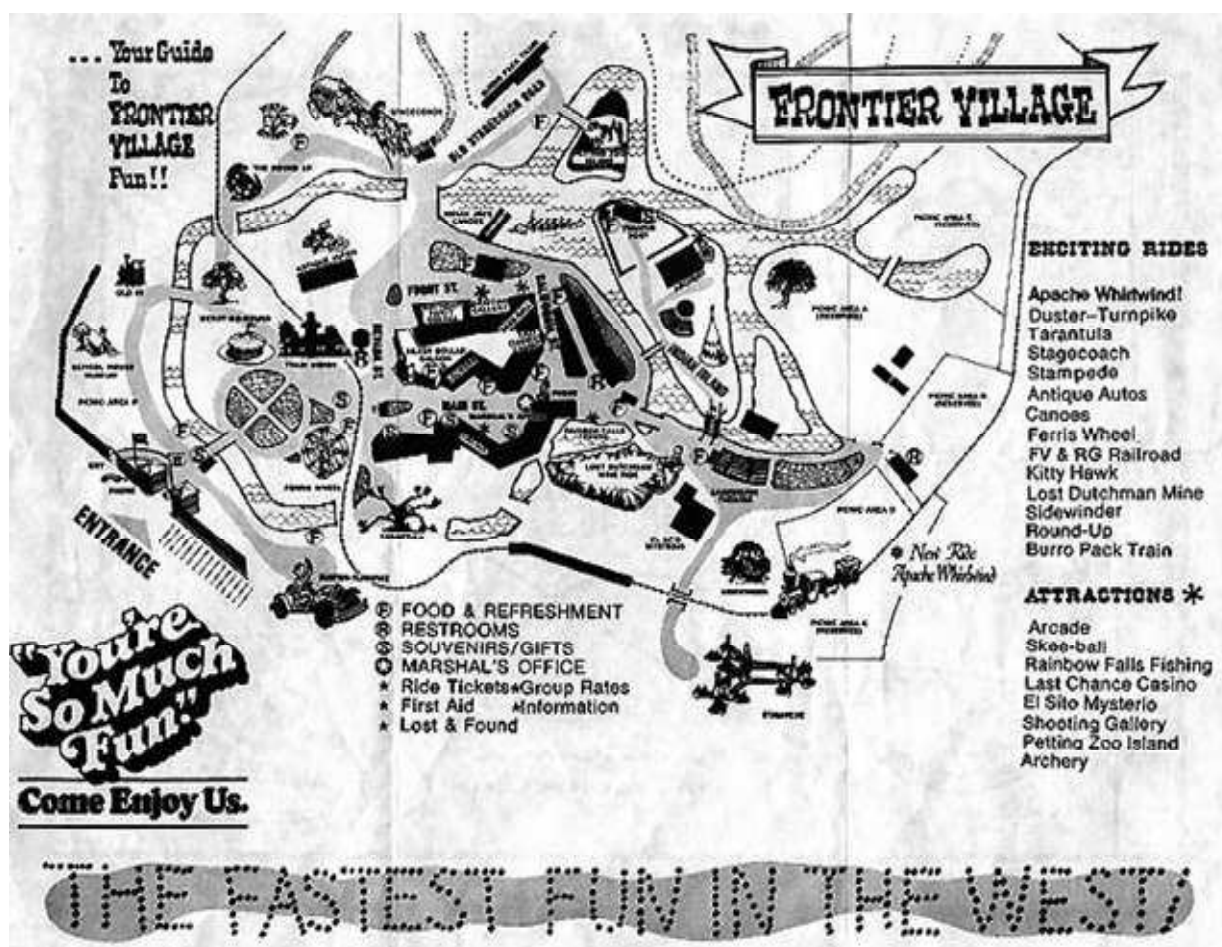


Figure 57. Map of Frontier Village, 1977

Numerous promotional campaigns were undertaken during Frontier Village's life; a handful were quite distinctive. One, in 1978, had Jeff Block and Rena Clark spend 37-straight days on the Ferris wheel. Hundreds of applicants were interviewed for the spot of one boy and one girl who would ride the wheel for as long as they could stand it. Not only did this event bring big media attention to Frontier Village, it also raised \$5,200 for the Police Athletic League's Youth Center. Rena and Jeff received \$500 each from Frontier Village and held the world's record for number of days spent on a Ferris wheel until Jeff broke it fourteen years later at the Orange County Fair. Another interesting

greeted at the San Jose airport by photographers, members of the press, and 60 pre-school-aged kids brought in by Frontier Village. He was put in a cage in the back of a pick-up truck and escorted by San Jose police to the city hall and then to Frontier Village. Frontier Village came up with several other unique characters who made regular appearances at Frontier Village, including Theodore Bear and Tumbleweed (an old gold digger), but none were as popular as Kactus Kong. Another popular event was the annual canoe marathon, which involved a couple of employees canoeing for days straight in the Frontier Village lake, or in Lake Berryessa or Lake Tahoe armed with a Frontier Village-labeled canoe. Also, on a whim one summer, Frontier Village sponsored a wedding at the park. Frontier Village paid for everything, even the wedding attire and the honeymoon, as long as the media could cover it. Again, it was all about PR and advertising. The park also brought in well-known characters such as Fred Flintstone, Barney Rubble, Scooby Doo, Yogi Bear, and many others. Stars made appearances too, such as Lorne Green from Bonanza, Jim Lang from the Dating Game, and the Sweathogs from Welcome Back Kotter.



Figure 59. Frontier Village Billboard, Date Unknown

Rio Grande continued to run Frontier Village until the cumulative impacts of the exhaustive legal battles with unhappy neighbors, the skyrocketing land values of San Jose property,¹¹ and the competition that came just twenty miles down the road in 1976 with the opening of Marriott's Great America in Santa Clara, California, became too much for the company to overcome. In a *San Francisco Chronicle* article from October of 1980, a spokesman for Rio Grande Industries, Marq Lipton, said that Frontier Village "...wasn't bringing the return on investment it should have...it didn't make good business sense to keep it open as an amusement park." In the end, Rio Grande could make exponentially more money by selling the park for its real estate, and that's just what they did. Frontier Village and its associated land was sold to a Los Angeles real estate developer, the Bren Company, and closed its doors in September of 1980, despite a petition with 10,000 signatures. Everything from the park was sold at a public auction and neighborhood development began on the sixty acres set aside for the theme park's expansion, as well as on the land that served as the parking lot. These new sprawling neighborhoods were named Frontier Village. Surprisingly, several of the park's elements, such as the fort and the train station, remained in place until the land on which Frontier Village sat became Edenvale Garden Park around 1990.¹² Today, if one knows where to look, remnants of Frontier Village can still be seen. There is a lifted pathway that exists in the park where the railroad tracks used to be. Other areas can be spotted where the earth was altered in some way to fit the construction of Frontier Village, such as the embankments made to

¹¹ By the late 1970s, San Jose was a city with one of the highest costs of living in the nation, which included the highest housing costs increase in America at 936% between 1976 and 2001. "San Jose Case Study, Part One: The Urban-Growth Boundary," Thoreau Institute, <http://www.ti.org/vaupdate31.html> (accessed January 6, 2011).

¹² Carlos Castillo, "Lost Frontier: Closed 24 years ago, a Silicon Valley amusement park now exists only in cyberspace," *Preservation*, [preservationnation.com](http://www.preservationnation.com), August 18, 2002, <http://www.preservationnation.org/magazine/story-of-the-week/2002/lost-frontier.html> (accessed January 13, 2012).

create Petting Zoo Island and Indian Island. The concrete rocks that made the fishing pond are still there, though the pond was drained years ago.

As the Frontier Village reunions at Edenvale Garden Park have grown each year, the City of San Jose has taken notice of the attention that the long-extinct theme park continues to receive. In 2007, the city decided to commemorate the theme park by not only designing a playground that is reminiscent of the style of the buildings that were present in Frontier Village, but they also placed bird houses around Edenvale Garden Park that replicate the buildings that once stood there, along with a plaque that shows images of what each spot used to look like when Frontier Village still existed. While this effort has been widely acclaimed, it still cannot take the place of the memories that many have of the theme park, nor compensate for the loss of such an important piece of Americana. Lillyan Brannon, leader of the petition drive to save the park, said just before Frontier Village closed, "We seem to be uprooting anything that has to do with our heritage and replacing old, historically important buildings with modern tract homes."¹³

¹³ "Remember Frontier Village," History Section, <http://www.frontiervillage.net/pages/history2.html> (accessed on September 12, 2011).



Figure 60. Birdhouse Photos from waymarking.com

The following pages contain images of Frontier Village when it was open. These photos, unless otherwise noted, are from the website “Remembering Frontier Village.”

The final pages have a handful of pictures of the property as it is today.

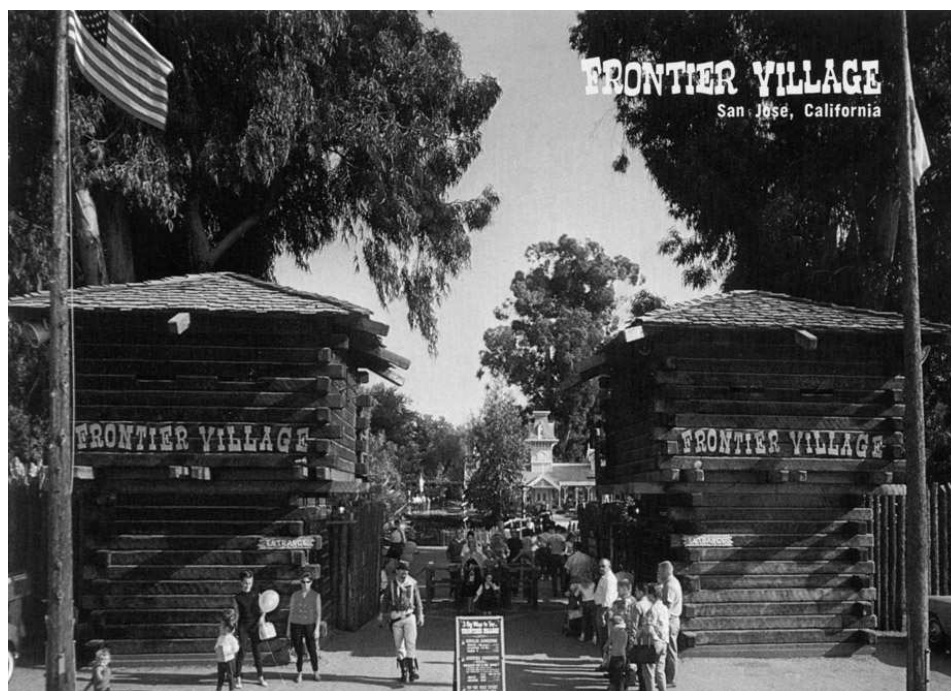


Figure 61. Frontier Village Main Gate



Figure 62. Central Square and the Railroad Station, Frontier Village



Figure 63. Old Western City Block at Frontier Village

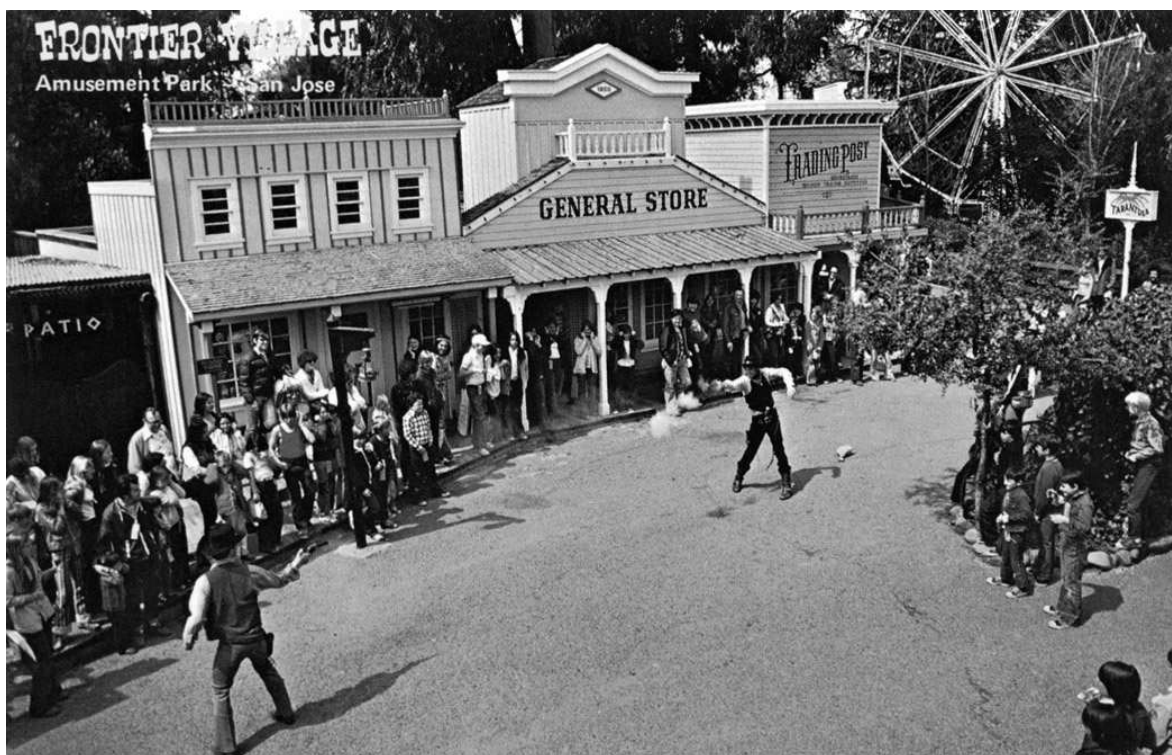


Figure 64. Old Western City Block at Frontier Village



Figure 65. Old Western City Block at Frontier Village



Figure 66. Old Western City Block at Frontier Village



Figure 67. Old Western City Block at Frontier Village



Figure 68. Indian Island at Frontier Village



Figure 69. Indian Island at Frontier Village



Figure 70. Indian Island at Frontier Village



Figure 71. Pillory



Figure 72. Burro Ride, Indian Jim's Canoe Ride, and the Stagecoach



Figure 73. The Famous Indian Bench



Figure 74. Rainbow Falls Fishing Pond



Figure 75. Various Rides



Figure 76. Edenvale Park, Present Day



Figure 77. Edenvale Park, Present Day



Figure 78. Hayes Mansion today¹⁴

¹⁴ Daniel Mitin, Panoramio, <http://www.panoramio.com/photo/5136186> (accessed January 12, 2012).

CHAPTER 5

Ghost Town in the Sky, Maggie Valley, North Carolina

As he wanders around the abandoned streets of Ghost Town in the Sky, Robert Bradley shakes his head at the broken glass that litters the overgrown boardwalks. Windows have been busted out, doors kicked in, and life-size human wax figures mutilated with baseball bats and beer bottles. The little western village on top of the mountain has become a popular place for local teens to congregate, drink, and let out their angst and frustrations by vandalizing the once-popular theme park. Now it's up to Bradley and his Malinois dog named Gator to keep an eye on the place. Robert Bradley, known as 'Apache Kid' in these parts, reminisces about the days when thousands of people walked the streets of Ghost Town, watching the holdups that were staged by Apache Kid himself. "I helped build many of these buildings," Apache Kid says as he points out various structures and spouts off years and names like he is reading from a western movie script. At the age of 18, he joined the Ghost Town in the Sky crew about a year after the theme park opened. His job was to put Ghost Town bumper stickers on the cars parked in the parking lot. He soon was in charge of designing and starring in stunts for the gunfight shows, and eventually was promoted to Entertainment Director. Now, fifty years later, Apache Kid seems as much a relic of the past as Ghost Town in the Sky does. "I'm half Cherokee, which is why I'm called Apache Kid," he says, as he points out the Native American artifacts he keeps on the dashboard of his pickup truck. Proud of his Indian heritage, Apache Kid wears a hip-pistol, cowboy boots, and a cowboy hat from under which his long braided hair hangs down his back. As important as his ancestry is to Apache's identity, Ghost Town in the Sky seems to have played as big a

role in his life, if not bigger. This is why he holds on dearly to the hope that someone will ride in and rescue the theme park, just as a cowboy would rescue a damsel in distress.

Ghost Town in the Sky is located in Maggie Valley, North Carolina. Haywood County, in which the small town of Maggie Valley sits, is home to nineteen peaks over six-thousand feet high, the greatest concentration of such highpoints of any county east of the Rocky Mountains. Maggie Valley, named after the daughter of the town's first postmaster in 1904, is situated between several of these high peaks in an elongated valley along the historic trade route, U.S. 19. Because of the narrowness of the valley, U.S. 19 (which becomes Soco Road while passing through Maggie Valley) is the only road through town, and all commercial and residential structures are located directly on it. Today, the road is lined with independently-owned restaurants, motels, and gift shops, but U.S. 19 was not always so commercialized on its five-mile stretch through Maggie Valley. In fact, when South Carolinian R.B. Coburn purchased 200 acres in 1960 to build his theme park, there wasn't much in Maggie Valley except pastureland and a handful of small restaurants and motels. With the popularity of Ghost Town in the Sky, locals took advantage of the opportunity by building numerous motels, restaurants, shops, golf courses, and other tourist attractions. Soco Road was widened from two to four lanes, and traffic lights were installed at various intersections. According to local author Hattie Caldwell Davis, "Mr. Coburn really put Maggie Valley on the map."¹⁵

In its hey-day in the 1960s and 70s, Ghost Town in the Sky was a Wild West theme park situated on top of Buck Mountain. Visitors either rode the ski-lift or incline railway to the top of the mountain, where they were welcomed into a world of cowboy

¹⁵ Hattie Caldwell Davis, *The History of Ghost Town, 1960-2007* (self-published, 2007), 12.

shootouts, stagecoach rides, and Indian dances, all set in a seemingly authentic western town. Ghost Town in the Sky was built by Coburn in 1960 for about \$1 million. Coburn originally purchased Buck Mountain with the intention of simply building a ski-lift to the top, but he decided to construct a western village after visiting Frontier City in Oklahoma City. Coburn enlisted the help of Russell Pearson, who was responsible for designing Frontier City and Silver Dollar City in Branson, Missouri. Pearson, who grew up on the Oklahoma Indian Territory, was not only a stickler for authenticity in his designs, but believed the most important thing was carrying out the western theme. He created a blueprint for the town that included such authentic details as “false-front” buildings, boardwalks, and other details that would only be seen in real western towns. His wife greatly contributed to the design process by building intricate scale models. Pearson was educated at Art Institutes in Kansas, Los Angeles, and Chicago before working for several studio prop and tourism departments in Hollywood. He even worked on the *Oklahoma!* movie set, which later proved useful when creating his western parks across the country. He then became a consultant on many parks across the country. When he was designing Ghost Town, Pearson “wanted to make it so authentic that when [visitors] come through the gates, they revert to olden times and their minds will become a part of it.”¹⁶

In mid-November of 1960, about two-hundred locals were hired to complete the construction using materials from the area. Over 50 feet was shaved off the top of the mountain to create a level area for the park. Over 300,000 feet of lumber, 200,000 feet of plywood, 20,000 pounds of nails, and 20,000 feet of underground electrical wiring were used in building the four towns that made up the park. Over 96,000 reproductions of

¹⁶ As quoted by Apache Kid.

1880s western gas lamps were installed. When it came to building the nation's first double incline railroad, workers used two D9 bulldozers to grade the land needed to install 21,000 feet of steel rails. The bulldozers were hooked to each other with cables, one of them acting as a stability unit and the other doing the actual work up and down the mountain. The cable was loosened when the bulldozer needed to go down the mountain and then tightened when the dozer needed to climb back up. When the earthwork was finished, the land was at a 66.1 percent grade and climbed over 1,200 feet. Once the rails were laid, workers installed four 48-passenger cars, putting two on each track. Each car contained 18,000 pounds of cable and was electrically operated from the top of the mountain. Once the 3,364 feet long railroad was completed, the chairlift was installed. Purchased by Coburn from Italy for \$150,000, the lift had 160 double chairs that traveled at a speed of 3.5 miles per hour and could carry 900 passengers per hour to the top of the mountain.

After a challenging but unhindered few months of construction, Ghost Town, which was called Ghost Mountain at the time, opened on May 1, 1961 to great popularity. Being located within close proximity to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park, as well as several cities like Waynesville (8 miles), Cherokee (15), Asheville (35), Gatlinburg (50), Highlands (65), Knoxville (85), Charlotte (150), Atlanta (185), and Winston-Salem (215) and four major travel routes, Interstate 40 and U.S. Highways 19, 23 and 74, Ghost Town was in a perfect location to attract vacationing families. More than forty buildings were finished inside and out. Inside the park, there were four "towns": Western Town, Mountain Town, Mining Town, and Indian Village. Coburn leased space in the Western Town and Mountain Town to local business owners; fifteen

total businesses set up shop when the park opened, including a blacksmith shop, gift shop, photo shop, and ice cream parlor. The Frontier Church held services on Sundays, and any contributions that were received were split between local churches. A stagecoach line ran inside the park for the first few years and horse rental was available, but these activities shut down years later due to misbehaving children who made both activities a liability for the park. Apache Kid gruffs that “kids were much better behaved back in the beginning. They didn’t throw rocks at the horses or try to jump off the stagecoach.”

Buildings in the Western Town included the Red Dog Saloon, Frontier Shop, Golden Nugget Casino, blacksmith shop, outpost, camera shop, marshal’s office, barber shop, Mad-Hatter shop, snack bar, ice cream parlor, Southern & Ghost Town Railway Station, Longhorn Hotel, Antique Music Museum, rock shop, Candy Kitchen, General Store, Emporium (which contained glassworks and other finer items), Printing Press (where a weekly newspaper was printed, as well as personal papers in which visitors could get their photos printed), Stagecoach Inn Restaurant, Silver Dollar Saloon, Last Chance Saloon, bank, Chinese Laundry, and an apothecary (the entire soda fountain and pharmacy bar were brought to Ghost Town from a deserted pharmacy building in Beckley, West Virginia). It was here that visitors could hop on the train and take a tour of the park, or catch the gun fights that occurred hourly throughout the day.

The Mountain Town area mostly focused on life in the Smoky Mountains. It had the Red Barn Playhouse, which had country music and dancing, another blacksmith shop, country store, an old mill, and the Mystery Shack, which was like the house of illusion

located in Frontier Village in San Jose where the natural laws of gravity appeared to be non-existent.

Ghost Town reached its highest point of 4,650 feet in Indian Village. This area illustrated Native American “culture” by displaying teepees and having Native Americans perform dances and participate in demonstrations. According to Apache Kid, the last real Cherokee Medicine Man worked in the Indian Village and taught visitors about rituals and traditions. Also within the Indian Village was a trading post, rock shop, rifle range, and the Pack Mule Gift Shop. There was also one live buffalo for visitors to view.

The Mining Town, which is where visitors exited or boarded the incline railroad and chairlift, contained a museum, rock shop, the Shortbridge Saloon, a rifle range, Pack Mule Gift Shop, and the Ghost Mine Ride, which was a haunted mine shaft ride.

Within each of the towns, shops sold merchandise or food to visitors while other shops served as “atmosphere buildings,” which contained prop items that gave the appearance of businesses from the old west. Apache Kid worked on displays during the off-season, perfecting them and adding more props. Such shops included a Chinese Laundry and General Store.

Many stars visited Ghost Town, including Burt Reynolds, Jon Provost (of *Lassie*), Tony Dow and Jerry Matthou (of *Leave it to Beaver*), John Bromfield (of *The Sheriff of Cochise*), Peter Brown (of *Laredo*), Lorne Greene (of *Bonanza*), Patty Peterson (of the *Donna Reed Show*), Richie Petrie (of the *Dick Van Dyke Show*), Paul O’Keefe (of the *Patty Duke Show*), Ken Weatherwax (who played Pugsly on *The Addams Family*), and Irene Ryan (*Granny* on *The Beverly Hillbillies*). Apache Kid has many stories about

visiting stars, especially Burt Reynolds, who spent a couple of summers at Ghost Town working on stunt shows. Apache Kid learned all of his stunt-show skills from Reynolds, as they devised the moves together. When Reynolds got the opportunity to do serious work in Hollywood, he invited his stunt partner along, but Apache Kid turned down the offer due to his love for Ghost Town and the belief that his job at Ghost Town offered more stability. Apache Kid readily admits today that he probably made a huge mistake.

Ghost Town was such a success that by the end of the first season, Coburn knew he wanted to open another park. In 1963, Six Gun Territory opened in Ocala, Florida on 254 acres. Pearson and his wife moved down to Ocala to oversee the construction process. Six Gun ended up being a near clone of Ghost Town, but the Western Town portion was bigger and the buildings seemed to be constructed a little better. There were also extra elements on the roadside to attract visitors, such as a sky ride, visible locomotive ride, and a huge concrete mountain serving as the focal point. Coburn then opened another park in Cherokee, North Carolina called Frontier Land. All of the parks were extremely successful. Ghost Town had attendance numbers of over 600,000 a season. Before the locals began building motels and restaurants to accommodate all of the visitors, people from out of town would sleep in and on their cars in the Ghost Town parking lot. Locals even found out-of-towners sleeping on their porches and camped in their front yards.¹⁷

¹⁷ Tim Hollis, *Dixie Before Disney: 100 Years of Roadside Fun* (Oxford: University of Mississippi Press, 1999), 161-171.



Figure 79. Ocala's Six Gun Territory, circa 1981.
From the Tampa Bay History Center, courtesy of Jessica Follman.

However, as discussed in chapter 1, the world of amusement park ownership began to change in the late 1960s. Independently-owned parks were purchased by corporations, and Ghost Town was no exception. In 1970, National Service Industries (NSI) made a stock exchange with Coburn for Ghost Town, Six Gun Territory, and Frontier Land. Coburn moved to Palm Beach, Florida to manage his cosmetics company, Jeanette. While NSI owned Ghost Town, they added other “towns” called Kiddieland and the Mile High Ride Area which contained more rides. They strayed away from the authenticity and thoughtfulness in design that originally made Ghost Town such a special place. New rides were no longer western-themed. The new owners added food booths and shops that were not western-themed, even adding neon signs advertising “pizza” and other modern-day foods, and they didn’t keep the park clean and in good condition. Rather than reinvesting money into the existing parks, NSI began purchasing other amusement parks and transforming them into wild-west theme parks, including Willow Grove Park in Willow Grove, Pennsylvania, which was renamed Six Gun Territory, and Rocky Glen Park near Scranton, Pennsylvania, which was renamed Ghost Town in the Glen. Without the necessary upkeep, the parks began to appear rundown. Combining

this with the fact that the Wild West theme in the mid-1970s just wasn't as popular as it once was, the parks struggled to stay open and eventually closed. In the late 1970s and early 80s, all of NSI's parks were put up for sale.¹⁸ At the same time, R.B. Coburn's son David was lamenting the fact that his father had sold Ghost Town in the Sky. According to Apache Kid, David expressed to his father that he had always dreamed of running Ghost Town and had secretly been upset when his father sold it. With this, R.B. repurchased Ghost Town in 1986 with the plan that David would relocate to Maggie Valley to run the theme park. However, shortly after the purchase, David was in a terrible boating accident in Florida that caused severe damage to his face and his mental capacity. With David now unable to manage Ghost Town, R.B. was left with a park that he was too old and too tired to run.

With Coburn back at the helm, the park went through many changes. With the realization that it was going to take more than gun slinging and can-can dancers to bring a new generation of visitors, Coburn began purchasing roller coasters and other thrill rides in hopes of reviving the place. In 1988, he built the Red Devil coaster, which was unique in that instead of climbing an incline in the beginning of the ride, the coaster comes out of the station already on top of the incline. Coburn brought in other various thrill rides, including Goldrusher, Sea Dragon, Monster, Mountain Town Swings, Undertaker, Dream Catcher, Casino, Round Up, Lil Devil, and Silver Bullet. However, the park continued to decline physically, and because of a lack of maintenance, rides were constantly breaking down. Visitor numbers continued to decrease and in 2002, as a final attempt at keep attendance up, Coburn bought a new roller coaster called the Shockwave for \$16 million.

¹⁸ Tim Hollis, *Glass Bottom Boats and Mermaid Tails: Florida's Tourist Springs* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 2006), 56-58.

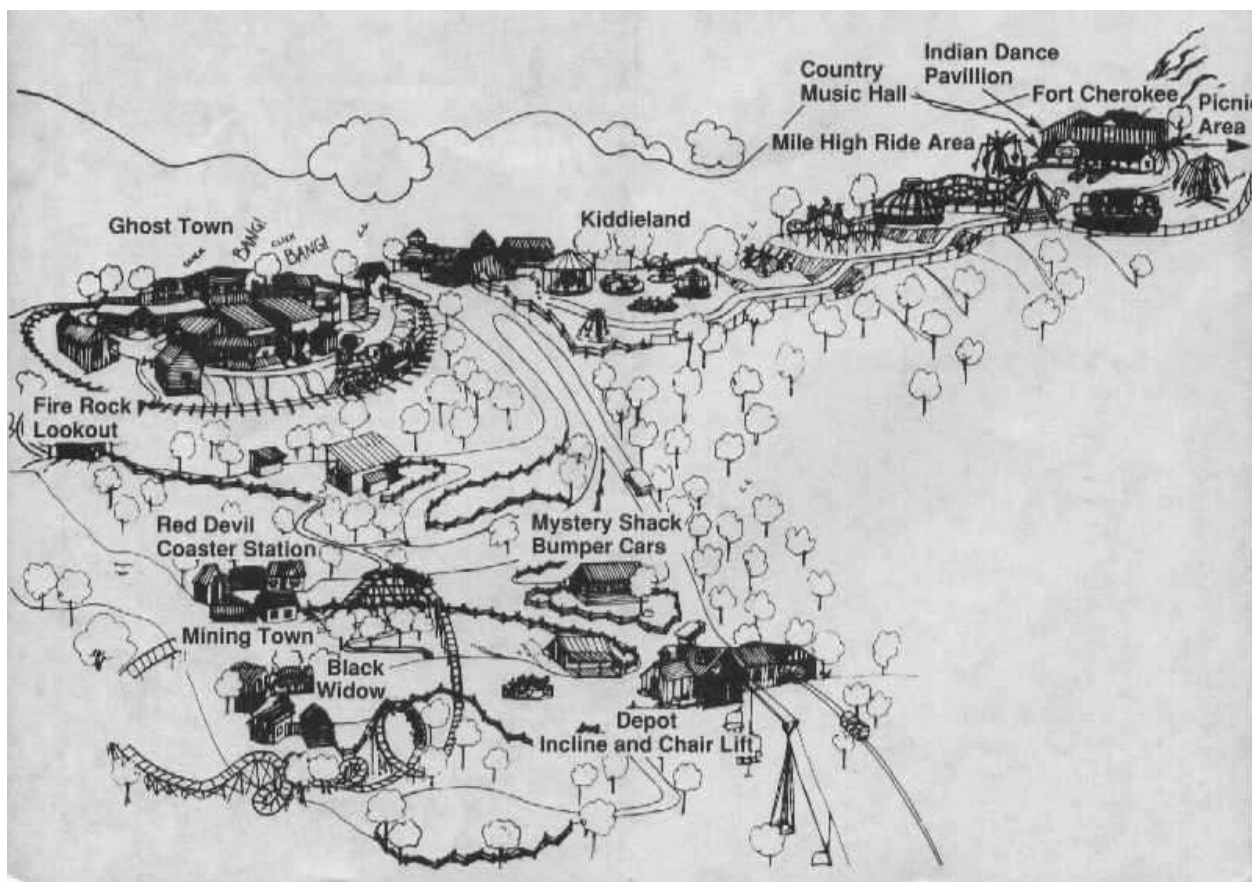


Figure 80. Map of Ghost Town in the Sky, Circa 2000¹⁹

However, two days after the Shockwave pieces made it to Maggie Valley, the chairlift broke down and left visitors stranded for over two hours. The state revoked the chairlift license, leading Coburn to finally put Ghost Town up for sale.²⁰ The park sat untouched for four years until 2006 when it was purchased by Allen and Carol Harper, Peter Hairston, and Hank Woodburn under the name Ghost Town Partners, LLC.²¹ \$38 million worth of repairs and renovations were made before the May 2007 re-opening and several rides were added, including the Geronimo Drop. The only problem was that some of the rides were not yet operational, including the theme park's most popular roller coaster, the

¹⁹ Jeff's Amusement Park Maps (<http://www.fortunecity.com/marina/foreshore/161/maps.html>).

²⁰ Quintin Ellison, "Ressurecting the Ghost of Maggie Past," *Smoky Mountain News*, May 23, 2007.

²¹ "Cowboys, Can-Can Girls and Old West Gunfights Come to Life in Maggie Valley as Ghost Town Celebrates its Grand Re-Opening," Press Release, April 23, 2007.

Red Devil, renamed the Cliffhanger and given a new paint job, which didn't open until the middle of the 2009 season. The incline railroad and the train never opened, nor did the Monster, and the Shockwave remained in storage. During the 2008 season, with only a little over 300,000 visitors, Ghost Town operated at a loss, falling severely behind on its \$9.5 million mortgage and accumulating over \$2.5 million in unpaid bills. The park was hanging on by its teeth, not even able to pay for basic repairs and upkeep, and as the new owners realized they had inherited a park with plenty of hidden problems, their financial resources began to run out. Combining this with the recession, which caused a decrease in attendance as well as made it impossible to get a loan, the owners began to seek bankruptcy protection.²²

Realizing that their economy hinged on the success of Ghost Town in the Sky, Maggie Valley locals rallied behind the park and did what they could to help bring it back to its former glory. While the park was unable to get a \$200,000 loan from the Town of Maggie Valley to help cover opening costs for the 2009 season, local businesses stepped up by putting in money as investors or offering services in-kind. Many local restaurants fed employees for a couple of weeks before opening day. Landscaping, parking lot repairs, and street repaving inside the park were all done for free by local companies. The park opened as scheduled for the 2009 season, though The Cliffhanger roller coaster didn't open until the middle of the summer.²³

Despite the relative success of the 2009 season, Ghost Town continued to fall further behind on payments. The season wasn't quite what it could have been, as the recession still immensely affected the park. According to Apache Kid, the area was also

²² Becky Johnson, "Ghost Town makes opening deadline; roller coaster still not working," *Smoky Mountain News*, May 27, 2009.

²³ Ibid.

plagued by a season of terrible weather: “All week long, it would be sunny without a cloud in the sky, but as soon as the weekends came, it would start to rain,” he said, pointing out that the majority of their business was done on the weekends. As the season came to a close, utilities were cut off due to lack of payment, overhead and operating expenses went unpaid, and it was said that even employees were left without payment for the last few weeks of work. Ghost Town filed for bankruptcy and proposed to pay off creditors 25% of what they owed over the next several years. Adding salt to the deep wound, while the payment proposal was pending in court, a horrific mudslide devastated the park in early 2010, causing several neighboring residents to evacuate. Rich Cove Road, the only road up to the park, was washed away in several places, as well as areas inside the park. Apache Kid believes that the mudslide was caused by the owners’ irresponsible construction of an expansion area during the 2007 renovation work, which left the land incredibly vulnerable. This was never proven.

The damage caused by the mudslide was fixed in late 2010 at a total cost of almost \$1.4 million. Most of the bill was paid for by federal and state taxes (\$1.3 million federal, \$284,000 state from the Department of Transportation). Also, Maggie Valley taxpayers and Ghost Town itself contributed \$25,000 each.²⁴ Since then, dealings with bankruptcy proceedings and negotiations with BB&T Bank (to which Ghost Town owes at least \$10.5 million) have continued, and more than one group of potential buyers has fallen through. There are rumors each season that the park will reopen, only to disappoint hopeful visitors as the reports are never true. Even still, during the summer at least a dozen cars a day pull into the huge empty parking lot expecting to spend the day in

²⁴ Becky Johnson, “Landslide Repair Below Ghost Town Set to Begin,” *Smoky Mountain News*, September 15, 2010.

Ghost Town. Their faces are always filled with confusion and sadness as they drive away.



Figure 81. Landslide. Photo Credit, John Fletcher, *Citizen-Times*

So how has Maggie Valley fared with the unpredictability of their main source of economic revenue? In short, not very well. Combining the terrible fate of Ghost Town with the poor national economy, the little town took a really hard hit. Many businesses closed. The economy of the town hinges so much on Ghost Town that when the park temporarily opened during the 2008-09 season, businesses saw a 30% increase in profits.²⁵ Without Ghost Town, Maggie Valley depends on the tourism of visiting bikers, as the area remains a popular haven for motorcycle enthusiasts. These dependable customers keep the remaining businesses afloat. All in all, the little town seems to keep trotting along, hoping that one day Ghost Town in the Sky will reopen, which will bring back the much-needed job opportunities and tourist business.

²⁵ Becky Johnson, "Ghost Town Liability Insurance Lapsed Prior to February 5 Mudslide," *Smoky Mountain News*, May 5, 2010.

Due to poor maintenance, bad weather, a mud slide, and the bad economy, Ghost Town couldn't seem to catch a break. However, in February of 2012, Ghost Town was purchased by Ms. Alaska Presley at a public auction. She is a long time Maggie Valley resident who has been involved with the park since its opening in 1961. One can hope that Ms. Presley is just the person that Ghost Town needs to bring the park back to its former beauty. But Apache Kid is skeptical. Until then, he and Gator will keep their posts as Ghost Town's unofficial night guards, overlooking the valley down below and waiting for the next intruders.

On the following pages are images of certain places in Ghost Town in the Sky. Photographs taken in July of 2011 (by the author) are juxtaposed with photographs taken in 1968 by Hugh Morton. Unless otherwise noted, the historic images are from the Hugh Morton Collection at the University of North Carolina.



Figure 82. Closed Cafeteria and Gift Shop, Ghost Town in the Sky, July 2011



Figure 83. Cafeteria and Gift Shop, Ghost Town in the Sky, 1968



Figure 84. Main Street, Ghost Town in the Sky, July 2011



Figure 85. Main Street, Ghost Town in the Sky, 1968



Figure 86. Main Street, Ghost Town in the Sky, July 2011



Figure 87. Main Street, Ghost Town in the Sky, 1968

CONCLUSION

Opening in 1952, Frontier Town in New York began as a city-dweller's dream and closed in 1998 due to the construction of Interstate-87, competition from other theme parks close by, the park's inability to expand and add thrill rides, and finally financial problems. The founder of Frontier Village in California was inspired by Disneyland and opened his park in 1961. It closed in 1980 due to decreasing numbers of visitors, increasing land values, competition, and legal battles brought on by neighbors who wanted the park closed. In North Carolina, Ghost Town in the Sky opened in 1961 after its founder was inspired by Frontier City in Oklahoma City. However, due to a lack of reinvestments by the later conglomerate owner, decreasing visitor numbers, tragic events, and just plain bad luck, the park began its slow decline in the 1980s and finally closed in the early 2000s.

Frontier Town, Frontier Village, and Ghost Town in the Sky closed for various reasons, some unique to each site, but in the grand scheme of things, they didn't last because of changes in the two basic elements that were the very root of their existence: the American obsession with the West and the independently-owned theme park industry. In the 1970s and 80s, many independent commercial enterprises across the country (and world, for that matter) were bought by conglomerates, and the theme park industry was no different. Generally speaking, the acquisition of a park by a conglomerate meant that there would be money to reinvest in the property's upkeep and to purchase what patrons wanted: thrill rides. Knott's Berry Farm, which began as a berry stand, expanded to include a Wild West theme area, and eventually grew to become a theme park, serves as an example of a conglomerate successfully taking over an existing theme park. Upon his

death, Knott's children sold the park to the Cedar Fair Entertainment Company, who continues to expand the park every year. On the other hand, a number of theme parks failed when the owning conglomerates lost sight of what made the parks successful and, consequently, didn't reinvest in the appropriate ways. As western movies and television shows disappeared from screens, Americans drifted away from a fascination with the West and onto things of the future (Star Wars, Transformers, video games, and the internet), they demanded more and more exciting rides and attractions. The random few independents that were barely hanging on could not compete due to a lack of space or funding. They either had to sell or just give up.

Wild West theme parks were a crucial part of childhood for the baby-boomer generation in the 1950s, 60s, and sometimes into the 70s and 80s. Most children growing up at this time remember at least visiting a Wild West theme park, and for many it was a very important part of their childhood. These theme parks existed for only a brief moment, but that moment was just long enough to have a lasting effect on the generations that grew up visiting them. One thing that I found so fascinating during my research for this paper was that whenever I mentioned my thesis topic to an adult, without a doubt they had some memory of visiting a Wild West theme park when they were young. They may not have remembered where it was located, but just the mere mention of such a place sparked a childhood memory and a conversation about "the good ole days." It has also been interesting in my research to see how people feel very much a part of these parks, and they attempt to keep these places alive by actually purchasing them, dedicating websites to them, or planning reunions for all who visited the parks. Whether the person was associated with the park, or just remembered visiting as a youngster, everyone

fiercely guards the memories of that place and, in the case of Ghost Town and even Frontier Town, they hold on to the hope that it will someday soon be revived for new generations. Will a revival happen? Probably not. Americans have outgrown little places like this. We have outgrown independently-owned establishments – so much so that planners and do-gooders are starting a “new” concept of mom-and-pop shops and farmer’s markets, in hopes of saving our doomed economy and shoddy city planning by going back to a simpler time.

Unfortunately, this investigation only skimmed the surface of this topic. If time had allowed, other aspects of Wild West theme parks could have been explored. One of those topics is the representation of Native Americans at Wild West theme parks. Besides the occasional fight between the Indians and the cowboys at the park, they were generally characterized as gentle, nature-loving beings who only wanted to show visitors their exotic dances, how to build a teepee, and the appropriate way to shoot a bow-and-arrow. Sensitivity and accuracy to different tribal traditions didn’t seem to be explored at the parks, as long as the Indians were wearing feather-headdresses, had long hair, and lived in teepees. However, this gross generalization of the Native American was on par with the way cowboys were characterized. The actors who portrayed both Indians and cowboys took their cues from movies and television shows. This is how both groups of people were portrayed to the masses, and it is what the masses expected to see. With a limited amount of time, I could not do this topic the justice it deserves.

Another topic worth examining is whether or not the concept of the “living museum” played a role in the development of Wild West theme parks, especially in the case of Frontier Town in New York, where the founder intended to educate as well as

entertain his visitors with artisans in period costumes showing their skills on historic mill equipment. Colonial Williamsburg opened to the public as a living museum in the 1930s, a good twenty to thirty years before these three Wild West parks opened. When did the living museum as a concept become popular? Did any of our theme park founders visit Williamsburg or other living museums?

What about roadside attractions? It seems like Wild West theme parks fit perfectly into the category of roadside attractions, as well. What exactly defines a roadside attraction? When, where, and how did they start? How did the existence of roadside attractions contribute to the founding of the first Wild West theme park?

Fourth, if time had permitted, I would have gathered a comprehensive list of Wild West theme parks that existed in America, and perhaps the world. While it seems like a daunting task, as many of the parks were not documented, other avenues could have been explored to gain more knowledge. Many of the parks had several elements in common, such as “real” western architecture, live shows and shootouts, similar rides, and the presence of stagecoaches. Experts in each of these fields may be able to offer lists of places at which their individual elements of study existed, thus providing several different lists to combine. I also would like to examine state records and documents at the Department of Commerce in search of licenses and records, which would aid in creating a list of parks.

As far as the preservation of Wild West theme parks is concerned, the topic deserves much deliberation. One thing that may have saved many of the defunct parks from closing could have been constant upgrades and renovations. Knott’s Berry Farm and the Disney Parks have continued to prosper because they expand or update every

year. However, many Wild West theme parks were unable to keep up with the changing times because they were confined by limited space or, by virtue of what they were, their theme. With a place that needs so desperately to adapt and update its facilities to keep up with newer, more thrilling parks, how does one tackle the topic of preservation and theme parks? Would these little Wild West theme parks warrant preservation in this category? Or should they be preserved as a slice of Americana, like Hat 'n Boots in Seattle, Washington, where one simply admires them as a piece of art?

The actual Wild West is no longer within our recent past. It is now far enough back in history that no one is alive to tell first-hand stories. This was not the case fifty years ago, at the height of the western theme-park era, when old men shared stories with their grandchildren about conquering the west. Whether or not Wild West theme parks deserve to be preserved, they represent a culmination of several different chapters in American history: the American obsession with the Wild West, the metamorphoses of the theme park and the theme park industry, and the era of the post-war American love affair with road-tripping for leisure.

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